Unpacking Ideas of Sexuality in Childhood: What do primary teachers and parents say?

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Abstract

Children who engage in perceived sexual actions face possible marginalization, isolation and exclusion in schools. The author’s counselling practice included numerous examples where effects of adults’ understanding have led to over reactive and punitive responses on children. This article complements a political ethic of social justice and supporting children’s agency—that is, children as actors and childhood as being and becoming. Teachers and parents of primary school children were interviewed as part of a current doctoral project on discourses of childhood sexuality in Aotearoa, New Zealand. In focus groups and individual interviews, six teachers and seven parents of children in one primary school responded to vignettes on children’s actions designed from counselling and anecdotal evidence of children’s experiences in New Zealand primary schools. Participants’ thoughts, ideas and reflections, including personal stories, were stimulated by the vignettes. Their understandings and perceptions of sexuality in childhood are explored, and discursive positionings for children in both the vignettes and participants’ responses are examined. The crisis for children is when school policy constrains understandings and experiences of childhood due to adult-centric constructions of sexuality without regard to multiple positions shaped by culture, community values, personal histories and ideas of childhood and sexuality.

Keywords: childhood sexuality, discourse, vignettes, child behaviour

Introduction

Circa 2005: the phone rings at my counselling practice. It is a social worker asking for advice about a boy who was found engaging in fellatio\(^1\) with another boy of the same age. The boys are five years old. The social worker describes a scene of panic at the school, especially when parents are called and arrive to be told what has happened. It is not unusual for parents to accuse one child of abuse on their son and question the school staff about what they were doing to ensure a healthy and safe environment for
the children. Labels of ‘sex offender’ and ‘toucher’ are easily given to the other child, and often remain for too long because of the difficulty in shifting an identity label with such loaded meaning. Meanwhile, that child and his parents experience the gaze of judgement and discipline from the school management and parents of the so-called, abused boy. Their fears increase and hope diminishes for their son: what does this mean for them as a family? What is a likely result for his education, his place in the school and how he negotiates relationship with peers? Does it mean that this boy is a sex offender, and is on a path or career of that way for life?

Too frequently I have worked with parents, teachers and social workers whose initial response to children acting in sexual ways with each other has been to interpret the action from their adult perspectives of sexuality. This is understandable, but unfair on children. It is not easy to expect an adult, especially one with responsibility for a child, such as a parent or teacher, to always pause and reflect when their immediate response might be to react and protect where there appears to be an action that is not, to all intents and purposes, appropriate for one of that age. The action is perceived as one of harm, that it is damaging, and that it is abusive ... or is it?

The background to this event at the school comes out in time: Zac told his teachers, and later his parents, that Will suggested they play ‘the sucking game’. Will said, according to Zac, that it was fun, and it felt nice. Will’s parents were saddened by this news. When attending an early childhood centre a year earlier, another boy had initiated the same ‘game’ with him. That boy, however, had been abused by his teenage uncle, and the ‘game’ was one of the acts that the boy’s uncle had him ‘play’. Will had a sense that this game was not okay, but it did give him some pleasure. His parents were really upset and angry when he told them about it—and while they were not angry with Will (that’s what they told him) he found that they were really angry with the other boy. They started to say things such as that the other boy had been ‘damaged’, that he had been hurt by his uncle, that what he did was not okay.

Curiously, a teacher at the play centre commented that it was not unusual for boys of preschool age to ‘behave like that together’, in fact, she said, ‘it’s fairly normal behaviour’ for them. Will’s parents thought this unusual—but who were they to know about such things? The teacher was qualified and trained in child development and responding to children’s learning and behaviour. Perhaps she was right ... or was she? They were confused ...

Adult Constructions of Childhood Sexuality

This article was born from experience of parents’ and teachers’ confusion and questions about how to understand and respond to apparently sexual actions between young children. It is also a political step along a process of supporting justice for children that acknowledges potentially harmful effects for children when adults in their lives respond harshly and judgementally. Specifically, when adults react to children’s sexual words and actions from adultist understandings (see LeFrancois, 2013), children’s identities are constrained and narrowed by dominant identity descriptors that highlight ideas of abnormal or deviant sexuality.

In particular, this article examines children’s worlds around sexuality, and how the shapes of these worlds are determined through various discursive ideas and practices:
where cultural understandings and ways of acting can be related to ethnocultural and sociocultural differences, religious beliefs and class distinctions. After reviewing a selection of the literature, I then describe my current doctoral project in which parents and teachers of children at primary school (aged about 5–11 years, in the New Zealand school system) are interviewed. Vignettes were used as a method to offer a story to which participants responded. This supported participants drawing from their own experiences and reflecting how these understandings and their ideas about sexuality in childhood were shaped. Furthermore, participants then offered further stories of their own, disclosing examples of children’s actions where adults had responded with understandings that it was sexual.

**Theorizing Sexuality in Childhood**

The theoretical approach in this study is poststructuralist and draws on concepts of discourse (Foucault, 1972) and positioning (Davies, 1991). Ideas are taken up from these theories about identity as multi-storied (White, 2007) in which children’s lives are socially constructed (Burr, 2003). Constructions of identity, particularly in school contexts, do not occur as distinct narratives apart from wider socio and cultural locations. Rather, children’s lives, and those of their families, are interconnected within contexts in which multiple discourses of culture, gender, education (among others, including sexuality), where children navigate these territories (as we all do) as part of human development.

My approach to the research drew upon various stories from clinical practice, as well as narratives shared by other counsellors, and teachers from across New Zealand. A series of six vignettes were developed for the doctoral project, fictional on their own, yet based on factual events in children’s lives. Vignette’s offered a methodological approach useful to interviewing on a sensitive topic (Barter & Renold, 2000), inviting participants to speak initially from a distant position. Using focus groups and individual interviews, participants all offered more personal stories of their own and others’ experiences.

The interviews were transcribed and will be analysed for understandings in discourse, framed by Foucault’s genealogical approach. The aim for this study is not to describe a tidy synthesis of what people think and reasons for actions, but to expose the complexities of multiple knowledges, competing perspectives, and various discursive locations in which ideas and practices of sexuality collide. From this study my hope is to generate possibilities for education and policy development on understanding and responding to sexual ‘events’ in children’s lives, particularly for those working alongside children.

**What is ‘Sexual’?**

Following social constructionist understandings of language as constitutive and that meanings are not taken for granted (Burr, 2003), I approach the area of sexuality in childhood with questions that support openness to multiple possibilities (see Flanagan, 2011). When children speak words that sound sexual to adults, I am curious about the context of the children’s own specific meanings. I have written of instances where the words children had used were heard and understood by adults as shockingly sexual and violent, and yet their intent included nothing of a sexual nature.
I wrote about Jed (see Flanagan, 2013, 141–142), an eight year old boy who threatened to ‘sex and rape’ one of the girls in his class. Jed’s words were a reaction to a girl who he experienced as teasing him and he had wanted to ‘get back at her’ by embarrassing her and hurting her. His intention was to embarrass her through kissing her, an action sometimes referred to by children as ‘sexing’. He also wanted to make her feel hurt. Jed was aware that rape involved hurting females, but had no idea of rape as a sexual action. To Jed, ‘sex and rape’ was no more than a threat to kiss and hurt the girl in response to her teasing of him. However, adult responses to his words took up assumptions of sexual intercourse and violence.

Suzanne Frayser (2003) helpfully identifies movement in language and meaning during the twentieth century. Frayser speaks of ‘a shift in cultural maps’ as social constructions of sexuality move from somewhat limited reproductive understandings of sexuality, to broader understandings of sexuality as relational and recreational. ‘An expanded view of sexuality has meant an expanded interpretation of what is sexual; sexual activity is not synonymous with intercourse. Words, looks, touches, pictures and movements can all be construed in sexual ways’ (Frayser, 2003, p. 267).

While as adults we can appreciate this shift in cultural maps, corresponding to feminism in the 1960s and gay rights movements in the 1970s, how might we understand these cultural shifts in the lives of children? Ideas of relationship and recreation do not sit well, particularly when understandings of the harm and extent of sexual abuse of children have been exposed more openly since the 1980s. A more likely response to children is one of moral panic, and assumptions that children who act sexually are deviant or damaged, abnormal or abused.

Vivian Burr (2003) succinctly describes a problem with the language available to us around sexuality.

The discourses of sexuality on offer in our present society offer a limited menu for the manufacture of sexual identity. However, two well-established discourses in particular call upon us to identify ourselves with respect to them: ‘normal’ sexuality; and ‘perverted’ sexuality …. Given these representations of sexuality that are culturally available to us, we have no choice but to fashion our identity out of them. … The discourses of sexuality available within our language leave us with very few other alternatives. (Burr, 2003, pp. 107–108)

Associated with limits to language to describe and shape identity in relation to sexuality, Kerry Robinson (2005) has identified ‘primarily three dominant contradictory discourses that operate around children and sexuality’ (pp. 68–69). These define relational understandings with adults that do not serve children well, as they are constructed from adultist notions of sexuality. Firstly, Robinson describes a ‘socially constructed binary relationship between adults and children’ where children are positioned as innocent and passive, asexual and immature, preferably unknowing of experiences that are ‘adult’—such as any thought or action related to sexuality. Secondly, Robinson locates a discourse of gendered childhood sexuality related to Freud’s concept of the ‘seductive child’. In this discourse children are responsible for their actions as independent human beings with will and knowledge. Where a child acts sexually, s/he is seen within constructs of tainted innocence and ‘the knowing child’. Lastly, Robinson explains a discourse of moral panic in
which children are viewed, ‘as sexual beings but lacking the maturity to comprehend and emotionally and physically control such behaviours’ (2005, p. 69).

Janise Mitchell (2005) takes an historical view towards problem sexual behaviour of children. Drawing from Jackson and Scott, Mitchell locates constructions of childhood innocence and evil as setting up children poorly, so that, ‘it is not surprising that children who betray the ideal are routinely demonised and pathologised resulting in their active exclusion from childhood’ (Mitchell, 2005, p. 6). However, according to Mitchell, the literature on children’s sexuality is limited in three areas: it is constrained by a limited conceptualization of sexuality; it is without a definition of normal sexual development that includes wider, social and cultural contexts; and children’s views about sexuality are absent.

This research explores participants’ understandings of sexuality in childhood, attends to discursive contexts for understanding child sexual activity, and plans to include children’s views.

Researching Child Sexuality

Recognizing the risks and constraints associated with researching a sensitive topic (see Flanagan, in press), and one in which my gendered self may not be well positioned given the dominance of male sexual aggression towards women and children, I have designed a project that aims for collaborative and respectful processes within the relationship as researcher with participants.

I think it is possible to broadly summarize previous research of sexuality in childhood using three categories: retrospective studies, in which researchers invite participants to review their own histories and experiences (see Lamb & Coakley, 1993; Larsson & Svedin, 2002a; Martinson, 1973/2000); observational studies (de Graaf & Rademakers, 2006; Friedrich, Grambsch, Broughton, Kuiper, & Beilke, 1991; Larsson & Svedin, 2002b; O’Sullivan, 2003); and case study analyses (Johnson, 1999, 2011). In each of these studies childhood is observed from a distance in space, time or age. In deciding upon a discursively-focussed study, my intention is to invite participants into a closer resonance with the vignettes as stories shared exploring possible connection of ideas informed with their own history and experience.

Ideas of closeness and resonance are important for this research because too often in families’ and children’s experience, sexual words and actions result in isolation and disruption. The genesis for why a middleclass, white male, is involved in research about children and sexuality is found in my practice as a counsellor responding to confusion and questions brought by teachers and parents. I maintain connection with other practitioners engaged in this work, and continue to hear stories of harsh responses that critically affect children and their families. This project responds to adultism (LeFrancois, 2013)—a position in which adults view children’s words and actions with an adult sense. It begs the question: when children speak and act, what do we (as adults) hear and see?

The research questions for this study aim to explore and interrogate what informs adults’ responses—that is, what shapes teachers and parents’ reactions to what children say and do that is perceived as sexual.
The participants for this study were recruited from a primary school and a counselling agency. Within this article some responses from teachers and parents in the participant school are included, while contributions from counsellors and parents who participated from the counselling agency will be reported in a later publication. Child participants from both contexts, at the time of writing, were yet to be interviewed.

The aim of the study was to explore the range of discourses that informs people’s understandings of sexuality in childhood within Aotearoa, New Zealand, thereby shaping how they respond to particular child events as possibly sexual, non-sexual or confused or unclear. To support this aim I chose to use vignettes with participants to elicit their thinking. These vignettes include actual stories from my clinical counselling practice and anecdotes from teachers and counsellors around the country, in which children had been positioned by significant adults as ‘sexualized’ or engaging in some form of ‘sexual behaviour’.

Barter and Renold (1999) define, ‘The vignette technique [as] a method that can elicit perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes from responses or comments to stories depicting scenarios and situations’. They also focus on the distinction between asking participants to respond to a scenario about what they themselves would do, or inviting them to consider how a third party (such as a character in the vignette) would respond, or sometimes both responses (Barter & Renold, 1999, 2000). The vignettes in my study are specifically designed to ask participants to consider the ideas they hold around the stories, which may or may not include how they might respond to a situation. The intention was to explore a scenario in which participants can offer their thinking about what they hear, what could be imagined as possible, and if they choose, to declare specific responses. In each case, as researcher, my curiosity, while interested in their initial or surface response, was in taking this information further into the ideas and experiences that may inform these responses. In deconstructing discourse(s), I hoped to hear more about the known or possible origins for the ways that participants responded.

Barter and Renold refer to the possible use of vignettes as ‘tapping general attitudes and beliefs’ (2000, p. 310). They refer to Wade’s and to Neale’s thinking on vignette’s, as exploring participants’ ethical frameworks and moral codes.

Barter and Renold (1999) also cite Neale in the use of vignettes to explore ‘potentially sensitive topics that participants might otherwise find difficult to discuss’. They remark that commenting on a story is not as threatening than if participants were asked to respond from direct personal experience. A specific point they make, which I recognized for this study, is that the use of vignettes can provide participants control over whether and when they might introduce personal experiential responses.

Six vignettes were designed for this study, in collaboration with doctoral supervisors and piloted with teachers and parents. The vignettes cover a range of children’s actions which have been, within the reality of their original contexts, responded to as sexual actions.
However, these scenarios were offered without too much detail so that participants can respond with their own initial questions. For this article only two vignettes are shared together with a sample of responses. The vignette is presented, and then followed by participants’ responses. Some reflection is also given about the discourses identified and potential positions taken up by teachers and parents in school contexts.

A total of six teachers (four teachers in a focus group and two individual interviews) and seven parents (all in a focus group) responded to these vignettes.

Vignette #1—Mark

A number of different but similar stories contributed to the construction of Vignette 1. Teachers, parents and counsellors, over years, have shared with me tales about young boys urinating on the school playground, and subsequent reactions by teachers. In each tale, I was informed, the reaction by teachers included perceptions of ‘the behaviour’ as sexual, offensive and unhygienic. The following story brought forth ideas of safety and hygiene from participants, including concerns about reactions from other parents, gender discourses on the differences between boys and girls, and understandings about the acceptability for boys to urinate in public or semi-public contexts.

Mark is five years old; it is his first day at school. He has been excited for some time about coming to school. The teacher on duty at lunchtime notices that he goes to the other side of the playground and there he urinates in full view of the children playing there.

The participant teachers all agreed that some action was required in response to Mark’s act, but were cautious about the potential for overreaction by other adults, especially parents. One teacher said, ‘For me, I need to react … I could have parents coming in saying that, “Tommy said that Mark weed in the playground, all over the playground equipment” … so it’s more reacting in a way of being proactive, just walking over to Mark and just politely saying, “Mark, at school, we go to the toilet in the toilet—do you know where that is?” …’. Another responded, ‘ … I do believe people will overreact … so I think my job as a teacher is to try to alleviate anybody overreacting and giving that poor boy a hard time’.

One participant added, ‘I have had parents come in and say … there’s a boy out there that’s weeing everywhere and our kids have to go and play around that spot … Their words would be, “the boy’s weeing everywhere” and all he’s done is weed once in one spot. But that’s what people do, they overreact. They’ve had their child’s perspective and the child might go home and they’ve said Mark’s weeing everywhere … that’s what I hear, that a parent hears what a child says and blows it up bigger and then it becomes bigger. So before it becomes big … you need to just let it, make sure that it isn’t getting out of perspective …’

Another participant highlighted hygiene as a reason to respond, and drew upon a specific incident in the school. ‘ … It’s happened already this year in the boys’ changing rooms and the toilet and the pool area and so I think it’s just one of those things … I had to support the teacher in bringing it into perspective because it was just a one-off [event] … going into the bigger picture thinking, “Why is a seven year old having to do
“Did he want to go to the toilet?” “What was the reasons [sic] for that possibly happening?” The participant then relayed an account of the child having to wash the area after children had dispersed, supported by the school caretaker, so that the child had to ‘clean it up’ so that it was ‘a safe area for people’, ‘... so that it was just done in the way, you know, a natural way, that is, “clean it up”, let’s move on’.

At a teacher’s mention of recording this event by making a note, the interviewer asked, ‘What’s the note for, or about?’ The participant replied, ‘Just so that if it did happen more than one time that I would probably just want to alert ... the child’s teacher or the parent and just say, 'look, what do we need to do to make Mark feel more comfortable at school because we don’t want him to feel embarrassed?’ The participant expressed concern for Mark, also not wanting ‘other children respond to him in a way that interprets it as he’s showing his private parts to the other children’. Later, the participant considered ‘that one child may see that [urinating] as, “oh, he’s doing a wee” ... [but] somebody, perhaps a girl, who it’s something new and different might have gone home and said, “guess what I saw today?”’ The intention was spoken as, ‘... giving him the benefit of the doubt, “I’m five; I’m playing; I need to wee”.’ The purpose of the note, therefore was, ‘if there is a comeback we’ve got a record ... well, actually, this is what it [the action] was’.

Parent participants reflected immediately on Mark’s anxiety about his first day at school. ‘[He’s] scared; ‘... maybe he’s had toilet training issues himself and then it’s the easiest way out, he’s busting and he goes where he closest to’; ‘he might have a medical condition’; ‘... did he know ... that it was actually inappropriate to wee outside in full view of everyone at the school?’

While the numbers in this study are small, and the purpose was not to generalize any results, it is interesting to note that the participating parents in the school gave responses that reflected on the experience for Mark himself. In contrast to the teachers, who took up positioning within professional discourse of managing a potentially reactive situation (risk aversion and safety in hygiene), the parents have expressed care in asking themselves questions about Mark’s health and comfort within a new and different environment.

**Vignette #2—Jackie**

The second vignette presented in this article was the fourth within the series of six vignettes used in the study. It differs from the first vignette by focussing on a girl whose action could be more likely, but not necessarily, perceived as sexual. With potential for the topic of masturbation to be explored, there was possibility for a range of medical and cultural discursive positionings on masturbation, and ideas of normal and abnormal or deviant (see Mallants & Casteels, 2008).

Jackie, a five year old girl uses one hand to rub herself between her legs, through her clothing. She does this almost every day at school, usually when she is lining up—either in the classroom or out in the playground.

The six teachers all responded with questions about Jackie as possibly experiencing anxiety or having a health issue. ‘... the personal touching is not a normal acceptable behaviour at school ... it’s either a medical need or like an emotional need that she needs some support with. ... it’s not socially acceptable in class ... I want that girl to be socially accepted”.

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Gender difference was referred to where participants reflected that a boy’s action of touching himself between the legs was more acceptable than a girl touching herself there. ‘I’m thinking when I’ve observed young boys doing a similar thing … I would respond differently with a girl. With boys I’ve put that down to comfort touching or (being) nervous’. Another said, ‘To me, it could possibly mean a bit more. Something happens when it gets to a girl and private parts—it’s more than a boy and private parts.’

One teacher, however, expressed concern for Jackie, given their own cultural and ethnic background, stating that this scenario heightened concerns for her; particularly given she is a girl. ‘It concerns me a bit more if it’s a girl’. A female participant commented, ‘I don’t know whether it’s because I’m female, and from my upbringing that would have been discouraged. I’m more familiar with boys, having grown up with three brothers and had a son. Having not had a daughter or (a sister) being around young girls, it makes me feel uncomfortable. That would probably set my alarm bells—you should be doing something—but I don’t know what’.

There were also wonderings about whether Jackie’s action was a potential indication of abuse. ‘… because of what body part it is, in that area … I don’t know if it’s my cultural thinking, how I’ve been brought up, but to me that could possibly mean a bit more … an indication of some kind of assault’.

The seven parent participants understood Jackie’s action as comfort touching, and described it as normal for young children—especially boys. ‘Right from toddlers they do it because it feels good’. ‘I think boys tend to be a little bit more hands on down there. It’s like a plaything’.

There was a sense from parents that Jackie’s action could be perceived as a developmental exploration. ‘Is it a habit? Is it a comfort thing? Is she physically uncomfortable? I wouldn’t make a big deal out of it at five’. ‘You can’t assume something sexual or negative’.

However, there was a view that Jackie should have a check in the event there was a medical concern, and whether there might be concern for effect of abuse. ‘I think it’s a normal human behaviour to jump to conclusions or think the bad things.’ ‘… we went from an innocent UTI [urinary tract infection] to it being something quite sinister’.

None of the participants included in this article referred to Jackie’s action as ‘masturbation’. I wonder whether this was because the word did not enter their thinking about what Jackie was doing, or whether perhaps they view the word as implying a sexualized meaning that did not fit with Jackie’s action as reported in the vignette.

Clarity? Confusion? … Continuing Questions …

How might we make sense of teachers and parents responses? This project is a work in progress, and the examples in this article give but a small glimpse to the study. Nonetheless, questions arise for how children’s actions are responded to, and how children’s identities are described by adults who are significant in their worlds. The multiplicity of responses from participants suggests a call for pluralistic understandings by adults when reading and assessing children’s actions. Such pluralism may have effects for school policies and practices in relation to responding to children and children’s use of words and actions perceived by adults as sexual.
Note
1. The term fellatio is used here simply to describe the act of one person using their mouth on the penis of a male. To call this ‘oral sex’ when the act occurs between children presumes a sense of acting sexually, which I question within this article. This act is also known colloquially as a blowjob or sucking off. In my practice I have heard many of these names used by adults when describing this act between young children.

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