

## **BERA Conference 2014: 25 September, Institute of Education, London, UK**

**Title:            Researching perceptions of childhood sexuality:  
                      Using vignettes in interviews with teachers,  
                      counsellors, parents and young children.**

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### **Abstract:**

Adults interpret children's actions from their own positionings within culture and gender discourses. Children's 'sexual' actions or 'sexualised behaviour' is responded to from ideas of innocence and indifference to moral panics and protective interventions. Adults express discomfort and uncertainty about how to understand and respond to young children acting this way.

Researching sexuality traverses social and cultural environments in which people live. Frayser (2003) refers to 'shifting cultural maps' as constructions of sexuality move from reproductive to relational and recreational understandings. "An expanded view of sexuality has meant an expanded interpretation of what is sexual; Words, looks, touches, pictures, and movements can all be construed in sexual ways" (Frayser, 2003, p. 267). Mitchell (2005), researching children's sexuality in the Australian context, noted limitations in the literature, including the conceptualisation of sexuality; the difficulty of defining 'normal' sexual development when children's sexuality is not considered in a wider, social and cultural context; and the dearth of research about children's understandings of sexuality.

This paper describes a New Zealand doctoral study exploring discourses shaping constructions of sexuality in childhood. In particular, the paper focuses on the methodological approach of using vignettes.

Primary school teachers, parents, counsellors and children responded to a series of vignettes within focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The use of vignettes produced a context of safe participation for participants. This method supported participants' confidence and trust with both the research process and their relationship with the researcher. As understandings were shared, enquiry brought forward further ideas and experiences from participants. Many readily disclosed more personal information, telling stories of child sexual activity: about themselves; their own children; family members; or stories of other children known to them.

A social constructionist framework underpins this research: children's experiences are multi-storied and multiple meanings are available in understandings of sexuality. Foucault's concepts of the genealogical method are used in the analysis of the literature, policies and practices on childhood sexuality, together with discursive positioning from the participants' narratives.

Vignettes gave a safe entry into discussions about childhood sexuality, beginning with less problematic stories and then further examples of developing complexity. They provided stories to be viewed at a distance, then allowing for closer and more personal sharing of experiences. Awareness and understanding multiple social and cultural discourses shaping constructions of childhood sexuality is useful for teachers, parents and counsellors.

## SLIDE 1

### Introduction

## SLIDE 2

This paper reports on a current doctoral study in which I am exploring social constructions of sexuality in childhood, applying discourse analysis to a range of texts including: academic literature; news media reports; social and education policies; and responses from participants to a series of vignettes. It is this last method of data collection, or retrieval, that I focus on today.

I come to this subject area from a professional background in counselling with children and young people over some years: in schools, with the NZ statutory child protection agency, and in a non-governmental community agency. For seven years now, I have been teaching in a Master of Counselling programme. This programme has a unique focus on narrative therapy, one of a number of postmodern therapies.

### Conceptual framework

Using social constructionist ideas of language as constitutive, in this research I explore understandings of childhood, sexuality, and ‘childhood sexuality’ as located in contexts of culture and gender particularly, but also within multiple discourses that shape children’s lives, including education, socio-economic status, class, faith/religion, among others (see Foucault, 1990). Language constructs a person’s understanding of themselves as well as how they are positioned by others through what is said about them (see Burr, 2003).

## The study

### SLIDE 3

The main aim of this study is to deconstruct social constructions of sexuality in childhood and to identify discourses that shape participants' thinking and actions.

Discourses throw up binaries or dualisms, and you may be familiar with these in relation to childhood: whether as passive learners and 'becoming' persons; or as active learners and persons in 'being'; as asexual or latent in their sexuality or as exploring, possibly deviant, sexual beings.

So when considering discourses of childhood and sexuality, problems quickly surface – such as how sexuality is language and discourses. Vivian Burr (2003) speaks of a limited menu, few alternatives, and only two, well-established discourses: normal and perverted.

### SLIDE 4

Suzanne Frayser (2003) writes about a shift in cultural maps over the last century in the USA, from constructions of sexuality as dominated by ideas and meanings of reproduction, to now include additional or alternative constructions of sexuality as relational and recreational. I think her words are telling:

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. (p.267)

This is relevant when deconstructing children's words, looks, touches, pictures, and movements – and problematic when adults take up sexualised understandings of these, usually with adult meanings, and often without recourse to inquiry from children about their intentions, understandings or meanings.

### SLIDE 5

Such problematising is recognised by Australian Janise Mitchell (2005) within a review of literature on children who engage in problem sexual behaviours. Mitchell noted three limitations: questioning how sexuality is conceptualised; defining ideas of normality in sexual development; and that children have largely been absent from research about children's understandings of sexuality and how these are shaped.

#### SLIDE 6

So when these notions of childhood and sexuality collide, constructions of childhood sexuality are positioned within this range of discourses. These are frequently unhelpful as they set people up in opposing positions, with grand claims from socio-cultural discourses with little room for dialogue. Robinson summarises her identification of “three dominant contradictory discourses that operate around childhood and sexuality” (2005, p. 68).

- Socially constructed binary adult/asexual, innocent, immature child;
- a gendered representation of ‘the knowing child’ whose innocence is tainted, but the child is held responsible, and
- A moral panic: where children are acknowledged as sexual beings but lacking maturity to control their behaviours (2005, pp.68-69)

#### SLIDE 7

Participants have been invited within two state/public primary schools and one counselling agency. These details indicate the size and decile ranking of the schools, and show a distinction in their ethnic composition. [Decile ranking is a funding formula based on the income levels of the community, whereby government can fund extra for schools in lower income areas. Unfortunately, over the years this ranking has been equated to quality of the school, and there has been

white flight from lower ranked schools]. The slide also show where participants originate.

#### SLIDE 8

So far there are 28 adult participants in three focus groups (a total of 15 people – 13 female and 2 males) and seventeen individual interviews (16 female and 1 male) (4 focus group participants also participated in interviews). Participants came from a range of socio-cultural backgrounds, but mainly reflecting the dominant European/Pakeha cultural position in Aotearoa New Zealand. All the adults were recruited through the participating schools or agency with information provided directly by me to staff or by staff to parents. Each focus group lasted about 90 minutes and interviews about 60 minutes. These focus group and interviews were recorded and transcribed and are data for subsequent discourse analysis.

#### SLIDE 9

My hopes in sharing this research story to date, and now about the vignettes used for the study, are to engage in dialogue over the value of vignettes... but also ask your response to the plan for the next stage of inclusion of children: my method and hopes ...

The six vignettes designed are from clinical and anecdotal stories of children's actions in NZ contexts where adults had responded to these events as sexual actions. In my reading and thinking about the use of vignettes, a number of authors have put forward ideas that fit comfortably with my conceptual framework and practice methodology. I wanted this method to give space for participants to tell their own narratives, but also to share their ideas without being expected to give personal history if they did not want to. By inviting them to

respond to another story, they had freedom to share their thinking, as well as offer their own narrative if it appeared safe for them to do so. So these vignettes are real, authentic stories, but also fictionalised; there is ambiguity about adult gender, character ethnicity, but detail about child age and gender. Some are single stage vignettes, and others have two or three stages in their telling.

#### SLIDE 10

So while these stories come from my own counselling practice or have been shared with me by teachers, principals and counsellors, the details have been changed so that any particular story is not exactly as it was first told. With participants, I have read out these stories, and then simply ask for their response. Sometimes participants ask questions, but I have generally responded with saying that is all the information we have, and invite them to respond to what is there.

#### SLIDE 11

The first vignette depicted a boy on his first day of school urinating in the school playground;

- Question whether this is sexual
- Opens space for gendered responses – that’s what boys do
- It was language as sexual by duty teacher (exposed himself; offensive)

#### SLIDES 12-13

the second vignette told of a girl and boy in the school playground where she kisses him on the lips;

- Boyfriend and girlfriend – language of heteronormative sexualities
- Cultural perspectives: that behaviour not acceptable in front of others, could suggest something sinister – kissing leads to sex
- The language of ‘more sexual offending’

- Some participants wondered about previous experience at the school

#### SLIDES 14-15

the third vignette was of a five year old boy pulling his pants down in the classroom;

- Opens space for gendered actions, acceptability of boys' mooning
- Matter of fact, non-sensational responses: we don't want to see your bits, put them away; you're distracting the class, pull up your pants and get on with your work
- Part 2 – different understanding, what about age difference

#### SLIDE 16

the fourth vignette was about a five year old girl rubbing herself between her legs;

- Itch, hygiene, infection – talk to school nurse
- If it was a boy we probably wouldn't notice
- Ideas of anxiety at school, self-comforting
- Query about something sinister – cultural lens, that part of the body, something is wrong – would be concerned about abuse/assault

#### SLIDES 17-18

the fifth vignette described a nine year old boy going into the toilet and touching another boy on his penis;

- Not okay – to – exploration?
- Aggressive?
- Marking of children of concern – story of the use of a high-visibility jacket for a child in the playground so teaching staff can see where he is

## SLIDES 19-21

the sixth vignette recounted a seven year old boy and six year old girl at the school sandpit, when he said to her, “and that’s when I put my penis in your vagina”

- Questions about language – if he said dick and pussy then I’d be worried
- Too much information for a child of that age
- When is the right age?

These vignettes were used to prompt discussions with participants about their perceptions of what is sexual; to expose binaries; about what actions could be deemed normal or deviant; and opening space to elicit any other personal and specific stories they might be willing to share.

These vignettes have worked well with adults, their sharing, new stories, and for some, professional development opportunity – i.e. impact of the research for their learning as professionals: teachers and counsellors.

I am now exploring ideas of use with children, as my initial plan has not worked; and the current intention is for story completion interviews, in a school where the research would fit within a PHE module on sexuality.

Individually or groups or both?

How involved should I be? I thought I would enquire to facilitate story elicitation, development and richness of narrative, develop meaning.

Your feedback is welcome.

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