Researching perceptions of child sexuality

Using vignettes in interviews with teachers, counsellors, parents, children

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http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-dr3XF7Z8KSY/UR-ZyIx0BdI/AAAAAAAABWC/fj342nqnFzs/s320/son_skirt.jpg
Current doctoral study

• Aims
  – What discourses shape ideas/practices around sexuality and sexual actions in childhood (7-12 yrs)
  – This presentation: Usefulness of vignettes as a method

• Background
  – Practice as a counsellor/family therapist
  – Questioning adult understandings of, and responses to, children’s actions perceived as sexual, e.g. ‘(problem) sexualised behaviour’
  – What is sexual/sexuality in children’s lives?
Discourses of sexuality...

...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)
A shift in cultural maps of sexuality

• Frayser (2003): a shift in ‘cultural maps’ as social 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; sexual activity is not synonymous with intercourse. Words, looks, touches, pictures, and movements can all be construed in sexual ways. (Frayser 2003, p. 267)
Mitchell (2005) noted that the literature on children’s sexuality has three limitations:

1. its conceptualisation of sexuality;
2. a definition of normal sexual development is difficult because children’s sexuality is not considered in a wider, social and cultural context; and
3. that there is a dearth of research about children’s understandings of sexuality and how these are shaped.
Discourses of child sexuality

- Childhood innocence - good / deviant - evil (naughty)
- Latent sexuality / precocious, ‘the knowing child’
- Normal, healthy, play, explore / abnormal, unhealthy, prey
- Child protection (safety) / sexual abuse (risk)
- Kerry Robinson (2005, pp. 68-69)
  - Socially constructed binary adult/asexual, innocent, immature child;
  - a gendered representation where ‘the knowing child’ whose innocence is tainted is held responsible
  - A moral panic: children as sexual beings but lacking maturity to control behaviours
School & agency demographics

2 primary schools (Years 1-6, ages 5-12, 600-700)
1 counselling agency (in city > 100,000)

- **South School** – Decile 3 (47% female, 53% male)
  - 46% Māori, 38% Pākehā, 8% Pacific, 4% Indian,
  - 6 teachers (5 female, 1 male; 8-20+ yrs experience)
  - 7 parents (6 female, 1 male)

- **North School** – Decile 10 (49% female, 51% male)
  - 60% Pākehā, 12% Māori, 6% Indian, 6% African,
  - 3 teachers (2 female, 1 male; <2 yrs experience)
  - 3 parents (all female)

- **Community Counselling Agency**
  - 6 female therapists
  - 3 female parents
Participant details

• 28 adult participants to date: 25 female, 3 male
  22 Pākehā, 3 Māori, 1 Pacific, 1 Indian, 1 Chinese
  9 teachers, 13 parents, 6 therapists

• 3 focus groups: teachers (4), parents (7),
  therapists (4)

• 17 interviews:
  Teachers: experienced (2), pre-registration (3);
  Parents: school (3), agency (3);
  Therapists (6)

• To interview child participants later in 2014
Why vignettes?
Experience-near, local knowledges

• A participant-generated textual data collection method (Braun & Clarke, 2013)
• To explore potentially sensitive topics (Neale, cited in Barter & Renold, 1999)
• Include real and actual experiences of children, authentic (Neff, cited in Barter & Renold, 2000), believable (Finch, 1987), plausible (Braun & Clarke, 2013)
• Ambiguous aspects to explore assumptions, e.g. age, gender, ethnicity (Finch, 1987; Braun & Clarke, 2013), “fuzziness is strength” (West, cited in Finch, 1987)
• Single or multiple stages (Braun & Clarke, 2013)
Process with vignettes:

• Development
  – Stories from clinical practice & teachers/parents – developed, fictionalised
  – Supervisors and ethics committee consulted
  – Piloted with teachers and parents

• Method
  – Read by me to participant(s), ‘what is your response?’
  – Responses recorded and further inquiry for: development of meaning; and what informs participants’ ideas & practices
  – Transcribe: then focus group summaries & interview transcripts sent for checking
Vignette #1

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.
Vignette #2

Deidre and Frank are both eight years old. Their classroom teacher sees them playing together in their classroom, and then again notices them playing together outside. During their morning playtime, Deirdre was seen by her teacher kissing Frank on the lips.
The teacher asked Deidre’s parents to come to a meeting with the principal. The principal told her parents that Deirdre’s behaviour was not ‘normal’ and could possibly lead to ‘more serious sexual offending’ as she gets older. The parents were told that Deirdre would be suspended, while the school considered its response.
Vignette #3

Oliver is a 5 year old boy who has been at school several months. He usually plays with the other boys at lunchtime on the playground. On this particular day, after lunch in the classroom, he pulls his pants down in front of the teacher and his classmates. He is smiling while he does this.
Earlier, while Oliver was playing a ball game with other boys on the playground another boy had pulled Oliver’s trousers down, showing his underwear. Boys and girls in the area laughed. Oliver laughed as well.
Vignette #4

Jackie, a 5 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.
Vignette #5

Quentin is a nine-year-old boy who goes to a rural school where there are children who are both older and younger in his classroom. In the toilet one day, he comes up behind another boy from his class, and puts his arms around his hips – touching the other boy’s penis.
Vignette #5 continued

The principal expelled Quentin from the school—he was no longer enrolled. When Quentin went to enrol at another school, he was turned down. Quentin’s parents heard from a parent-friend that a teacher had referred to him as a “sex offender”.

Vignette #6

Steven, a 7 year old boy is overheard by the class teacher while he was talking to Lucy, aged 6, in the playground. They were sitting by the sand pit, when he said to Lucy, “...and that is when I put my penis in your vagina”.
The teacher was uncertain what to do – she then asked them if they were going to play in the sandpit or perhaps join other classmates on the field. The teacher then phoned Steven’s parents to talk about what she had heard.
Steven’s mother has recently given birth, and Steven had been curious about where babies come from, how they are made. His mother said she believed in being honest with children, and would answer their questions openly and honestly. When she said that there was a baby growing in her tummy, Steven was inquisitive, and not satisfied when told that “Daddy plants a seed that grows in Mummy’s tummy”.