

Researching the sensitive: gendered violence and child abuse

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Abstract

This paper draws on two separate research projects dealing with sensitive issues. The first project looks at work done in high schools with boys on gender and violence. The second investigates teachers' work with maltreated pre-school age children. Our paper explores some of the dilemmas and constraints of researching topics like violence, including sexual violence. The paper also considers the ways in which the current marketisation of schools and child care centres and the changing context of teachers' work serves to silence inquiry into topics such as gendered violence in schools and child abuse.

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Introduction

When we began writing this paper, the media had momentarily focused public attention on both the issue of homophobia and child abuse. At that time, two particularly sensational cases were making headlines in Australia and in the United States. The first related to the physical abuse of a four-year-old boy, Matthew Nemet, in Queensland Australia, who has become known as the "boy-in-the-box". Matthew was reported to have been "systematically tortured" by his mother and her boyfriend. Editorials and Letters to the Editor give an indication of the emotion this case generated by describing the abuse as "living death by degrees" and his carers as "sadistic monsters" (see for example, Sweetman, 22 October 1998:17; Usher, 23 October 1998:11). The second related to the brutal murder in Wyoming, USA, of a gay university student, Matthew Shephard. He died in hospital four days after being beaten with a pistol and tied to a fence. His killing has been widely interpreted as an anti-gay hate crime (see for example, Kenworthy, 13 October, 1998:7). In instances such as these there is often an outpouring of emotion and public outcry accompanied by a collective interrogation of society with questions such as: "What the hell is going on out there?" (Smyth, 25 October, 1998:24); "What has allowed these events to occur?"; "How can these problems be remedied or ameliorated by schools and education systems?" Ironically, it has

been our experience that schools are often unwilling to address the issues of child abuse and homophobic violence.

This paper has grown out of two different education research projects which sought to address these issues. The first relates to attempts in some secondary schools to address issues of gendered violence, including homophobic violence, and the second to the responses of early childhood teachers to child abuse victims in their care. We have become aware of a number of similar problems, which have impacted upon the conduct of our research in both schools and child care centres. The one we want to discuss in this paper relates to the difficulties we faced in negotiating access into research sites. We are aware that child abuse and homophobia evoke feelings of discomfort amongst many school administrators and teachers. In this paper we will argue that whilst this uneasiness with issues such as homophobia and child abuse has many sources, the unwillingness of schools and child care centres to have this type of research conducted within their environs is related in part to fears about the reputations of schooling and child care institutions and is linked to the "market culture" (Kenway, Fitzclarence, Collier & Bigum, 1996:1) of the school and the centre. We are sympathetic to these fears which are clearly evident in a market approach to education. We are also mindful of individuals' rights to "silent objection" (Poland & Pederson, 1998:300). However, we are troubled by the ways in which research into child abuse and homophobia is silenced within schools and child care centres by moves towards marketisation.

The Australian State and its States have increasingly treated gendered violence as an issue of social justice. (See Franzway *et al.*, 1989: Chapter Six, for a discussion of the state and sexual violence in relation to rape law reform in New South Wales and the Furler Report on child sexual abuse in South Australia.) Gender and violence is also being treated within policy as an educational issue (for example the *National Action Plan for the Education of Girls 1993-97*; the national policy *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools*; and Queensland's *Social Justice Strategy 1994-1998*). These policies provide teachers, administrators and researchers with a legitimate foothold for addressing issues of child abuse and gendered violence. However, because of the dominance of marketisation and real or perceived fears by administrators about the stigma which will become associated with their institutions if they address these issues, the effects of social justice orientated policies are limited in both schools and child care centres. Thus, as Fitzclarence and Kenway (1993:94) have stated, "With the economy as the 'master discourse', those aspects of injustice which are not connected to matters economic slip off the policy agenda". This appears to have been the case in the two projects discussed here, thus we argue that in order to minimise this slippage there needs to be continued research indicating the importance of confronting these issues in schools and child care centres.

The Research Projects

The first research project examined the effects of the implementation of gender and violence programs for boys in two Australian secondary schools, both of which were situated in the State of Queensland. One of these schools, Tamville State High is situated in a reasonably affluent suburb of the State's capital, Brisbane. This school has a very high middle-class population. However, it also has large numbers of poor and non-Anglo students who take advantage of the school's position on a rail line to travel to Tamville from some of Brisbane's most depressed suburbs. This willingness to travel long distances to the school is fuelled by both the positive reputation of the school and also to negative community perceptions about the schools in the poorer suburbs. The other school, Mountainview State High, is situated in the State's Sunshine Coast hinterland. The students in this school are a curious mix. The local rural community consists of both farmers and "alternative lifestylers" and many of the students within the school have very different outlooks on the world. For instance, among a

significant group of boys in the research study gun lobby style politics were passionately articulated, whilst other boys appeared to be quite disdainful of what they regarded as "redneck" attitudes.

In both of these schools gender and violence programs were run through a personal development type curriculum in a subject known in Queensland as Human Relationships Education (HRE). The programs were conducted once a week over a whole term (eight and nine weeks) in 1996. The classes were conducted with all boy groupings whilst other teachers conducted a similar program with the girls from these classes. At Mountainview the program focused on the grade 12 (final year) boys. This program was initiated by the school's guidance counsellor as a response to a perceived problem amongst these boys. The Tamville program was conducted with grade nine and grade eleven boys and was the product of a project initiated by a community group, Men Against Sexual Assault (MASA) (see Pease, 1997 for a history of this Australian men's group). Research in this school was primarily by way of interviews with teachers, students and policy makers who had been involved in the implementation of these programs. Classroom observations were also used.

In the early discussions about the boys' project at Mountainview a number of meetings were held between school staff (teachers and administrators) and the program implementers. In one of these meetings the importance of addressing homophobia was raised. One of the administrators at this meeting was concerned about the raising of this issue commenting that the community was not ready for such issues to be discussed. At Tamville, the research project was originally entitled "Challenging Violence in Schools". However, the principal refused permission for the research to be conducted at the school on the grounds that people would think that the school had a problem with violence. A grudging support to the research was given after the project was renamed, "Promoting Supportive School Environments".

The second research project investigated early childhood teachers' work with maltreated children, that is, children who have a history of child abuse and neglect. Part of this study was conducted in South East Queensland in a geographical area designated by Kids Help Line, a freecall national telephone counselling service for children and young people, to have a high incidence of child abuse and neglect (Kids Help Line, 1997). This part of the study involved issuing invitations to all Directors of child care centres in the area to participate in focus groups and interviews to discuss their teaching practice with maltreated children. The aim was to engage 10-12 child care centre directors, who had an early childhood teaching qualification and who were experienced in dealing with cases of child maltreatment, in a long term collaborative examination of their teaching practice with these children. A journey spanning several months was envisaged. It would involve a recursive cycle of inquiry with the aim of capturing, collaboratively examining and co-constructing narratives and theoretical insights into what directors need to know to work with children with a history of abuse and neglect. It was stressed that it was not particular children or the progress of specific cases that would be the subject of study. The teachers would not be asked to provide identifying information about individual children. Rather it would be the teacher and his/her teaching practice that would be the subject of the investigation.

When no directors responded, the subsequent phase of the research centred around the need to make sense of this non response which seemed more like a deafening silence. A survey was sent to the directors to elicit reasons for their silence, and follow up telephone contact with each of them was planned. Several open ended interviews were conducted with other professionals working in government and non government organisations providing services for abused children and their families to determine their views on the directors' silence.

At one of these meetings a government bureaucrat questioned the grounds for conducting the study in this particular area. The Kids Help Line data was challenged and it was suggested that the conduct of the study could harm, not only the image of child care services in the area, but the district as a whole. It was emphasised that previously the area was subject to a great deal of adverse publicity. It was stressed that some people had worked very hard for a very long time to "change the face" of the area and to present a positive image of the area. Individuals recently engaged to provide reports for the area had consciously couched these reports positively to present prospects for a bright future. Advice was provided that researchers would in fact, be wise to "consider the political implications" of conducting the study in the area. The bureaucrat then invoked State Government policy and legislation relating to confidentiality of information in child care centres to deter any further contact with directors in the area. As previously stated the requirement for acquiring or maintaining a child care centre license is adhering to the imperatives laid out in the *Child Care Regulations (Child Care Centres) 1991* (Office of Child Care, 1991). In this instance, the reputation of centres in the area and the image of child care in general was perceived to be in jeopardy.

Doing sensitive research in times of marketisation

Very little has been written about the unwillingness of schools and child care centres to participate in research on issues like homophobia and child abuse because of their sensitivity. The research literature stresses that such issues are "sensitive" (see for example Lee, 1993; Renzetti & Lee, 1993). However, in the main, the focus is usually on the broader "ethical considerations" involved in conducting such work. For instance, texts will often refer to such things as obtaining consent, "doing no harm", minimising potentially stressful situations for the participants, and respecting the beliefs, attitudes, wishes and rights of the participants including the right to refuse participation and to withdraw from the project at any time (see for example Glesne & Peshkin, 1992: 109-125). These are significant issues. We are aware that revealing the existence of gendered violence or discovering child abuse in schools and centres can be deeply disturbing. It may cause further distress for those who are already exposed to violence. This creates tensions and dilemmas for researchers. We are also aware that research into areas deemed "sensitive" is necessary and important.

In *Doing Research on Sensitive Topics*, Lee (1993:4) reminds us that "sensitive" research is that which potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it. It may also be research to which there are certain real or perceived risks attached. It is the concept of threat or risk that we would like to explore further. It is a highly contextual matter because what is thought to be innocuous by one group may be perceived as ominous by another. Lee (1993:5) sums up by saying that:

the sensitive character of a piece of research seemingly inheres less in the specific topic and more in the relationship between that topic and the social context... within which the research is conducted...

He goes on to make a point which is crucial "research is embedded in institutional contexts which shape and limit research agendas" (1993:20). Marketisation and corporate managerialism are shaping the institutional context of schooling and child care at the current moment.

Our research is occurring in a period when the Queensland education system, like many places elsewhere, is experiencing significant moves towards school-based management (). This restructuring is a product of "corporate managerial" (Considine, 1988) discourses which have been shaping much of public policy over the last decade. Corporate managerialism in relation to education, for instance in Victoria and Queensland, has led to a valorisation of

school based management (as it has in many other places, see Smyth, 1993). Self-managed schools have often been held up as a means by which bureaucratic structures can be flattened by lessening the influence of central offices over the day to day running of schools. Devolution has been advocated as a means of minimising the administrative state's control over local sites, and of leading to more effective schooling by enabling those who are operating at the chalk face to have a greater say in the running of their schools (see for example, Caldwell and Spinks, 1992; Chubb and Moe, 1990). Within this policy approach, schools become competitors in the educational market and principals become responsible for capturing the maximum amount of an ever-restricting level of funds. Marketisation thus becomes a central feature of the move towards school-based management (Ball, 1994; Kenway and Epstein, 1996; Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard and Henry, 1997). It is quite possible that this marketisation of the state education system will have a negative impact upon issues of gender justice within schools and the educational bureaucracy (Blackmore, 1995; 1996; Distant, 1995; Kenway and Epstein, 1996; Lingard, 1995; Pringle and Timperly, 1995). For our experiences in attempting to conduct research on the sensitive issues of child abuse and gendered violence have indicated that marketisation works to silence concerns raised in these areas.

A factor in this silencing is the changing role of the principal under school based management, for as Blackmore (1996:345) notes, school based management is more principal-centred than it is teacher-centred. Within a school based management framework principals often carry the weight of responsibility of making their school a "success" or "failure", both of which are often measured by the extent to which schools can make themselves attractive to the parents of potential students. This means that the perceived success or failure of a principal is often linked with the ways in which they are able to present their schools. Such presentations will impact upon the extent to which a school captures an adequate proportion of the available student market. In order to secure a satisfactory market share of students, principals have to advertise their schools in such a way as to make it attractive to potential "clients". The vagaries of market forces make it an imperative that schools do not have their image within the community damaged. Thus, as Blackmore (1996:341) states, "The dominant image of the successful school in the market is increasingly modelled on private school images of the well uniformed, well disciplined, well resourced and academically successful student." This means, for instance, that principals will be more inclined to highlight their school's programs for gifted and talented students rather than their programs to address issues of violence in schools or to confront issues of child abuse amongst their student population. The latter programs are not seen as a major attraction for clients.

This situation is not necessarily one in which administrators feel pleased to find themselves, for whilst principals are given more autonomy and more space to implement programs specific to their school there is a catch. This catch relates to the ways in which principals self-regulate their approaches to educational innovation in relation to parameters set by the administrative state (Ball, 1993; 1994; Taylor *et al.*, 1997). Many principals aspired to their positioning within the education system for the opportunities it would present them with for improving the education of students (Blackmore, 1996). However, for these principals, devolution has not presented them with such opportunities. Rather the pressure to be a manager has meant that such concerns have taken second place to various corporate managerial ends. Thus, whilst the move to school based management signals an increase in power to administrators, this increase is restricted to making decisions based upon particular market concerns. The demands on schools to manage their own budgets in a competitive market economy has enabled the administrative state to set guidelines about what happens in schools through accountability measures and funding criteria, whilst leaving those in administrative positions within schools to also carry the burden for managing the costs of this process. This has enabled, as Welch (1996:11) notes, the central bureaucracy to set the

agenda for schools without having to take any responsibility for failures. This responsibility often falls upon the principal. The situation regarding child care is very much the same.

Child care is acknowledged as an important contributor to children's learning and development, and an essential component of family and working life in Australia (Ochiltree & Edgar, 1995). This research is occurring at a time when paid child care in Australia, like many other places, has experienced immense growth in demand (The Economic Planning and Advisory Commission, 1996). There has been dramatic increase in the use of 'formal' or centre-based care to the extent that the paid child care sector and now carries the tag of a "billion dollar industry with links to the economy through employment" (Tainton, 1996:8). The Economic Planning and Advisory Commission (EPAC) estimate that 0.9 percent of the paid workforce are employed in the formal child care sector.

The quality of formal child care in Australia is governed by a two tiered institutional arrangement for "monitoring and enforcement" of centre based care (EPAC 1996:81). This consists of a licensing system implemented by the States and a quality accreditation process run by the Commonwealth. Through licensing control, State governments regulate factors such as standards for buildings (for example outdoor space allocations in centres and the size and number of toilets), and standards for operational aspects of centres (such as staffing ratios, criminal history checks on staff, and recording systems). In Queensland, the Department of Families, Youth and Community Care is responsible for licensing of child care centres. A particular strand of staff in this department have a statutory responsibility to monitor the operations of child care services so that these services meet minimum obligations under the three pieces of Queensland legislation pertaining to child care services. This is a prerequisite to providing child care to the public for a fee. Under these arrangements, the licensee (or nominated owner) of the service, not the director of the centre (who can be a qualified early childhood teacher) is responsible for the conduct of the service. A licensee may be a private person or a company, or an organisation such as a community or church group. Licensees may operate the centres for profit, that is as a commercial, profit-making businesses, or not-for-profit, that is as a community-based service (Brennan, 1994). The second tier, the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS, commonly referred to in centres as "accreditation") introduced in 1994 implements national minimum regulatory standards and quality assurance procedures for child care centres and is conducted by peer review. This process ensures that public providers who have been licensed by the State are subject to further quality review and must be accredited in order to apply for a government operational subsidy. In this process, funding has been harnessed to quality.

Within this framework, "quality" becomes a marketable commodity reflecting similar patterns observed in the Queensland education system with respect to leadership. The ways in which licensees and directors can market their centres are linked to this quality phenomenon. Perhaps unintentionally, accreditation has delivered an air of competition amongst centres. In response, child care has embraced the principles of advertising, marketing and management evidenced in the "compete or die" (Wassom, 1998a; 1998b) corporate environment. Parents, but mostly women, are "clients" or consumers in the child care market. They have the ability to "vote with their feet", thus enforcing quality standards through their market power. The drive for funding has resulted in an obsession with quality and quality has been valorized. Whether they operate for profit, or not for profit, child care centres are in direct competition with each other. Texts about the management of child care facilities urge centres to assume the "competitive initiative" (see for example Neugebauer, 1997; 1998; Stephens, 1997). They are competitors in the care for money market and licensees are responsible for capturing the maximum amount of patronage to ensure commonwealth operational subsidies (calculated on the basis of enrolments) remain at an

optimum level. Accreditation is used as a marketing tool and centres proudly display their seal of approval and their badge of quality.

Licensees and directors have not only become administrators and managers, but also instruments in the control of quality, and facilitators in the obsession with "universal" health and safety precautions. Licensees and directors must build and maintain enrolments and struggle for profitability. In such a climate there is pressure for centres to appeal in the marketplace, to sound unique and to look inviting. Image is everything. Commercialisation is evidenced in the shiny brochures that appear in mailboxes and in the signs that adorn child care shop fronts announcing the catchy names of centres: *Joeys' Play Place*; *Mrs O'Malley's Garden*, *Wentworth Hill Children's Development Centre* all conjure different images. The image of the quality child care centre in the market is modelled on the well resourced, clean and safe children's garden. Centres would not be encouraged to use their child protection policy as a marketing point. They are more likely to use the badge of accreditation which, by association, implies safety.

It is quite possible that this air of competition encourages *Mrs O'Malley's Garden* to think twice about reporting maltreatment or becoming involved in a project that may adversely affect the centre's image. As one director recently wrote: "Privately owned child care centres can be more concerned with the effects of sharing this type of information. It could affect enrolments or infer a lack of confidentiality between client and centre" (Anonymous, personal communication, 1 April 1998). As previously discussed, this has implications for licensing as well as maintaining enrolments and ensuring viability of the centre.

In some instances competition in the marketplace acts against cooperation and collaboration between and amongst child care centres. A licensee of *Wentworth Hill Children's Development Centre* may not encourage his/her staff to share information about the way they handle distressed children with the staff from *Joeys' Play Place*. Furthermore, it would be ever more appealing in the marketplace for *Mrs O'Malley's Garden* to boast that their staff have spent their time in professional development learning about literacy and numeracy standards rather than learning about the procedures for identifying and reporting child abuse and neglect. Consequently when researchers approach schools and child care centres to do research on these sensitive topics they are not exactly greeted with glee.

Considering sensitivity

Lee (1993:4) suggests that sensitive topics include: areas which are "private, stressful or sacred" or potentially expose "stigmatizing [sic] or incriminating" information. Researching child abuse and homophobia may do both of these things and therefore cause pain and harm to individuals who are already experiencing oppression. Thus, we support the development of university ethics committees and ethical guidelines for researchers to minimise intrusive and prurient types of research. Lee also suggests that sensitive research can disturb the "vested interests of powerful persons or institutions" (Lee, 1993:4). It is this third point which concerns us here. It seems to us that research into these areas is often stymied in ways which protect existing relations of power which benefit from silences about child abuse and homophobic violence. In many instances the first two aspects of sensitive research outlined by Lee, that such matters are private and that they can have stigmatising consequences, are used by institutions, such as child care centres and schools, to prevent this type of research being conducted within their grounds.

Matters of sexuality and child abuse are both issues which many educational traditionalists see as being outside the purveyance of schools and child care centres. That is, they are treated as private matters which should not disturb the "core business" of public institutions such as schools and child care centres where the "core business" is articulated as being the

academic and social development of clients. When issues of homophobia and child sexual abuse are raised images of deviant sexualities are often evoked; and for many traditionally minded teachers and child care workers such discussions and considerations are beyond the scope of their job requirements. However, as Kelly (1992) has stated in relation to schools:

Whatever conservative ideologues might say, schools are places where sex talk, sexual behavior, sexual relationships, sexual abuse and harassment, sexual identity, sexual divisions and sexual politics are threaded through the wharp and wheft of interactions between students, staff and students and staff. (Kelly, 1992:27)

It seems clear to us that considerations of these matters should be part of the core business of schools and child care centres. We would argue that children's abilities to develop both socially and academically requires attention being given to their safety both at home and at either the school or the child care centre. This is a matter of social justice.

Unfortunately violence is often widely conceptualised as individual/personal transgressions of morality or aberrations of individual psycho-pathology. We see the exercise of violence differently. What goes on in the private-personal world is often a political matter. As feminists have long stated, the personal is political. We would therefore argue, that both homophobic violence and child abuse need to be seen as matters of social justice and that there needs to be some recognition in schools and child care centres that personal experiences of domination and violence are part of a wider pattern of oppression. This will mean that "...what was formerly borne as one's private misery is ... understood...as caused and transformable by a pattern of human decisions and practices" (Flax, 1992:206). Viewing gendered violence, including homophobia and child abuse as more than private acts does not ignore the culpability of the "individual". What it does do is draw the state, its institutions and dominant interests into the picture as accomplices.

This complicity is particularly obvious when institutional leaders seek to protect their institutions at the expense of their clients. Lee's point that sensitive research can lead to stigmatisation can refer as much to institutions as it does individuals or social groups of people. For instance such research may be read as evidence, for example, that child abuse and violence (or homosexuality) are present within these places; and hence that they are not safe or desirable places to send one's children. In the case of schools dealing with homophobia one of us has heard a deputy principal comment that if too much attention was given to this issue parents would think the school was a school for gays and lesbians and would not send their children there (Mills, 1996). In another instance a director of a child care centre commented to one of us that she did not believe that child abuse occurred at her centre and hence that there was no point doing such research there. Attitudes such as these are understandable when the success of a schooling or child care centre is judged in market terms. However, failure to address these issues serves to protect social arrangements which have an interest in such silences.

The areas of child abuse and homophobia are also "sensitive" in Lee's terms because their exposure does threaten vested interests. Denials about child abuse and refusals to address matters of homophobia in schools serve, amongst other things, to reinforce existing gendered relations of power and the exploitation of children. In the case of child abuse, empirical evidence has determined that it is mostly perpetrated by members of a child's own family. For as Schostak (1986:129) has stated: "The most violent institution in society after the police and the military is the family". The exposure of child abuse as a family matter thus disrupts normalised constructions of the family as a place of safety for children and reinforces feminist concerns about the family (see Horsfall, 1991; Scutt, 1990; Thorne, 1982;

Ward, 1984; for comments made by school girls in relation to family violence see Gilbert, Gilbert and McGinty, 1994; Herbert, 1989). The discovery of child abuse is thus not only a threat to the privacy of the family but also to the sanctity of the nuclear family unit. Failure to address issues of homophobia serves to protect both the dominance of existing heterosexual relationships and existing patterns of gender arrangements. Homophobia is an effective mechanism for policing normalised constructions of masculinity and femininity. The policing of masculinity, for instance, through homophobic violence can have horrible consequences as demonstrated in the case of Matthew Shepherd.

Addressing child abuse and homophobia in child care centres and schools can have market consequences because of the ways in which the nuclear family has been "romanticized, mythologized (and) iconized" (MacLeod and Saragera, 1991:43) and the ways in which homophobia has been naturalised as a common response to "deviance". This means that child care directors and school principals who are operating within a "marketplace" are unlikely to want to disturb the normalcy of the nuclear family or existing masculinist-heterosexist relations of power. They are thus often unwilling to permit research into sensitive issues which associate their institutions with deviancy. However, until these sorts of issues are seen to be the concern of child care centres and schools; until work on these topics does not carry with it a social stigma; and until the normalcy of the nuclear family and existing gendered relations of power are challenged, little will happen to end the brutalities of child abuse and gendered violence.

Conclusion

Research into the sensitive areas of child abuse and gendered violence is important. However, such research must take into account a number of ethical issues which can have dangerous consequences for those being researched. We have not covered those in this paper. Rather our focus has been on the ways in which such research has been prevented within a market approach to the delivery of child care and schooling. It seems clear to us that marketisation has in some instance served to silence research into these areas. Whilst we understand the invidious positions within which principals and child care centre licensees find themselves, failure to acknowledge the impact of child abuse and gendered violence on children or students is unacceptable. Thus, it appears that there needs to be a central policy concern with these issues to ensure that research in this area can continue to inform policy making. Such a policy concern will help to construct dealing with child abuse and gendered violence as part of the core business of schools child care centres.

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