



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WAIKATO**  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

*Faculty of Education*

Te Kura Toi Tangata

**Waikato Journal of Education**

Te Hautaka Mātauranga o Waikato

Volume 16, Issue 3: 2011



# WAIKATO JOURNAL OF EDUCATION TE HAUTAKA MĀTAURANGA O WAIKATO

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Subscriptions: Within NZ \$40; Overseas NZ \$50

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Publisher: Faculty of Education, The University of Waikato

Cover design: Donn Ratana

Printed by: Waikato Print

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ISSN 1173-6135

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## Making sense of children's sexuality: Understanding sexual development and activity in education contexts

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### Abstract

*Most adults find that responding to sexual activity by children and between children is challenging. This is especially so for teachers in early childhood and primary education contexts. One common view is that children should not be sexual or, if they are, that there is something wrong. These concerns are strengthened by popular adult discourses of sexuality and accompanying ideas of sexual privacy. Among discourses of child development sit ideas of childhood innocence and natural curiosity. However, assumptions of abuse arise when children's sexual curiosity extends beyond what is considered appropriate or "normal". This article examines pre-adolescent child sexual development. It scans some of the ideas and practices that shape adults' understandings in the construction of children's sexual identities. These ideas and practices also shape children's knowledges. Adult responses to children's sexual actions often portray children as abused, abusive or deviant. Using a social constructionist lens, this paper offers educators an exploration of a range of understandings and alternative thinking about sexuality in the worlds of children—yet also critiques ideas of normative behaviour and development. The reader is invited to think about how children can be encouraged to share their subjective meanings and understandings.*

### Keywords

Child sexuality, constructions of childhood, sexuality discourses, sexual development, child sexual behaviour.

### Introduction

When did you last experience a conversation in the staffroom or classroom in an early childhood centre, or primary or intermediate school about children's sexuality, or sexual activity among children? My guess is that this kind of conversation is unlikely to occur unless an event calls for it. And then, when it does occur, the tone is frequently one of concern and reaction. To use the words "child" and "sexual" within the same



sentence is generally problematic. Burman (2008) proposes that dominant thinking about sexuality is as “something only imposed *upon* children, rather than the property *of* children” (p. 117). It is as if children should not be sexual.

In recent years, the field of childhood studies has introduced new ways of thinking about children and challenged the understandings of childhood within traditional human development approaches (for example, Burman, 2008; James & Prout, 1997; Uprichard, 2008). This article surveys the intersection of childhood studies and sexuality research, and explores alternative thinking about sexuality in the worlds of children. After describing how ideas of children’s sexuality have been constructed, and how discourses shape these constructions, the article considers possibilities for new thinking beyond assumptions and judgments.

A social constructionist approach is used to explore and understand the place that sexuality has in children’s lives—one which views children as positioned within multiple discourses on childhood and sexuality. Discourses are the ideas and practices that shape the worlds we are immersed in, and include the known and unknown influences and effects of culture, gender, religion, class, theories, regulations, stereotypes, roles, language, text and popular (mis)understandings (among others). Burr (2003) writes: “For each of us, then, a multitude of discourses is constantly at work constructing and producing our identity” (p. 108). As you read the following story about Jason, I invite you to think about the multiple discourses which position the characters and produce their identities. What discourses shape the positions within the scenario? How do these discursive positionings have effects for the characters? What is the origin of the language, the descriptions of events, and the labels that are applied? How many levels of understanding of this event are possible, and how do the discourses constrain other possibilities?

One hope for this article is that teachers might explore their own understandings and approaches when responding to children’s sexual activity. Similarly, James and Prout (1997) invite openness to children’s experience and meaning, particularly in the contexts of their world views:

... childhood and children’s social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, and not just in respect to their social construction by adults. This means that children must be seen as actively involved in the construction of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. (p. 4)

This story, while appearing fantastic, is based on an actual event and one that I was involved in as a therapist. Identifying details have been omitted to protect privacy. Ideally, Jason would present his own view of his own life but in fact there was no position made for him to speak.

#### Jason’s story

Jason was a nine-year-old boy who attended a rural school. A boy of similar age at the school complained to his teacher that Jason had come up to him in the toilet and put his arms around him and grabbed him over his genital area. The principal’s response was to expel him from the school—he was no longer enrolled. Local rural schools easily and quickly heard of this event and principals positioned themselves to refuse enrolment—fearing that he was a “sex offender”. Because he was not enrolled in a school, the

specialist education service SE (Special Education) at that time could not be involved for assessment or treatment possibilities. Jason's parents approached schools in the nearest town to enrol him—but there too, the principals had decided to keep Jason from enrolment. It was some 12 months before the Ministry of Education then directed a school in the town to accept Jason and enrol him. SE was then engaged and assessed Jason as having a moderate intellectual disability. He and his family were then able to access different support for his social and school learning opportunities.

The story above tells about the response(s) to Jason's socially transgressive "sexual" identity. We glimpse some of the positions that he, his parents, the principal and other characters are offered—to accept or reject or have imposed on them through discourse. Jason has no voice while adult constructions of children's sexuality are enacted, and these continue to shape effects for children and adults. (For readers interested in research about how primary school principals have understood and responded to sexual acts between children see Flanagan, 2009; and for an article on therapy with children about their so-called sexuality, see Flanagan, 2010a).

### **Constructions of childhood sexuality**

#### Constructions of children in childhood studies

Readers may be familiar with the ideas of childhood(s) in the works of Ariès (1962), Burman (2008), James, Jenks and Prout (1998), and Postman (1994). Possibly less well known are the writings on the social constructions of sexuality (Burr, 2003; Foucault, 1978/1990; and Seidman, 2003). Constructions of *childhood sexuality* draw on ideas from each of these archives and more (Bancroft, 2003; Sandfort & Rademakers, 2000). A number of authors have also written about histories of childhood sexuality (Egan & Hawkes, 2008; Jackson, 1990; Jenkins, 2003).

Key themes from the field of childhood studies focus on a move away from fixed perspectives of childhood as defined only in adult terms, and as the child as an object of study. Children are seen as agents in their own right, social actors rather than passive, and able to influence their own worlds. Children included in research are now more likely to be active participants, distinguishing *children's research* from *research of children*.

Earlier sexology studies made use of statistical and quantitative analyses, and methodologically focussed on observational studies and/or self-report accounts of adults. Aligned with biological science and medical approaches, child sexuality research has largely been reduced to standardised norms about behaviours (Friedrich, Grambsch, Broughton, & Kuiper Beilke, 1991), pathologising deviance (AACAP, 1999), or the sexual "knowledge" of children (Goldman & Goldman, 1982). Furthermore, these previous studies do not critically attend to children's agentic positioning, or even acknowledge the possibility of agency where a child could have voice. Nor is there space to consider ideas of power/knowledge within children's experience, or the relations of power enacted by adults within the systems of surveillance and discipline in children's lives. I find some resonance with Uprichard's (2008) theorising of children as "being and becomings" (as distinct from "being" or "becoming") to enhance "the agency that child[ren have] ... in the world" (p. 303). Could it be possible for children to have some voice and take up an agentic positioning within narratives that speak to identities inclusive of sexuality and sexual activity?

Within themes that surface when reading or talking about children and sexuality are the ways that children are constructed within a binary position as either sexual or non-sexual beings. Some parents and teachers might consider that children are non-sexual or asexual and perceive that when children act sexually they are deviant sexual beings—or at the extreme, sexual offenders. Within this view children’s sexuality is itself transgressive. The discourses and language available within our society and culture(s) frequently constrain possibilities to understand children’s lives, and therefore shape events and meanings in limited and unhelpful ways. To borrow Burman’s (2008) words:

... there is a need to attend to young people’s own definitions and self-representations; and, as a group who have little access to technologies of representation and their distribution, there is indeed a role for advocates and activists to promote this (p. 280).

In sharing Jason’s story I hope that readers may begin to explore the possibilities of meaning in a child’s world. In doing so, there may be productive effects for how you respond to situations in education where you have responsibility for a child who acts sexually towards others.

### **Discourses on sexuality**

Burr (2003) succinctly identifies the constraints of current sexuality discourse:

... 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. (p. 107)

She further states:

The discourses of sexuality available within our language leave us with very few other alternatives. (Burr, 2003, p. 108)

It seems that we struggle to find the language, and to acknowledge the limits of our language, when we come to express this sensitive and tricky area of our lives. So when we come to articulate children’s sexuality, it appears all the more difficult. What ways can we begin to explore unpacking the meaning of sexual events in children’s lives?

I find three questions arise from Burr’s words when thinking about childhood sexuality:

1. How does sexuality fit in understanding children’s identities?
2. How do these two dominant sexuality discourses (normal/perverted) shape the lives of children?
3. What alternatives emerge when the dominant discourse is questioned?

It is necessary to question discourse because children’s identity formation as sexual beings is shaped by the discourses they are immersed in. Discourses of children’s sexuality are sustained when stories are “told” and “retold” by children—through their spoken and enacted lives. Discourses of children’s sexuality are sustained when stories are “told” and “retold” by adults—and in the literature these are based largely on observation or retrospective studies. Information from such research holds value in

contributing to some understandings, but there is a huge gap for our understanding of children's own perceptions and how they currently construct their identities as sexual beings in relation to others. I am thinking of how children live out, test out and enact their identities in relationship with each other, as well in the words, actions and thoughts that exist in relationship with adults: their parents, teachers and others. The ways we currently speak and write about childhood sexuality are constrained within the language available to describe these representations, so childhood sexual identity is largely fashioned out of ideas of "normalcy" and "perversion".

Given these representations of sexuality that are culturally available to us, we have no choice but to fashion our identity out of them. (Burr, 2003, pp. 107–108)

So what effects does this have for the children we work alongside? How can we begin to establish and engage in conversations that do not isolate nor stigmatise children (and their families) but invite ways of speaking that support exploration and direction for their own thinking, talking, meaning and understanding, as well as their safety?

Children's identity construction is shaped using the language available to them and used *on* them by adults, in the contexts of their cultural and social locations. I would like to attend especially to the constitutive power of language and how language defines meaning. For example, what might this mean when asking about "child sexual *behaviour*" or "child sexual *actions*"? The former, originating from behavioural psychology, suggests an intentional and responsible relationship between the child and the action, which encourages blame. The latter, however invites exploration of an action that offers investigation with a lesser moral or judgemental position about the child. When children use a phrase that has a common parlance, the taken-for-granted meaning should not be accepted—but the child asked for their own definition of their language. For example, many parents and teachers I have worked with in the past were shocked when they heard a child speak of "sexing" another child. To many adults this phrase took on connotations of genital touching of some form, or even intercourse. However, to a number of children I have worked with the meaning was simply "kissing and hugging"!

So too, as a therapist informed by narrative ideas, there is an effort in my work to explore multiple stories available to clients in their lives (particularly stories that support preferred identities), rather than an identity defined by a singular or dominating problem story that is unhelpful. An awareness of the contexts of culture, gender and class is necessary to gain a sense of meaning appropriate to people within their own social locations. Understandings of identity construction rely on the stories we tell about ourselves, and the stories that are told about us. The telling and retelling, the nuances of words and tone, along with the perceptions conveyed contribute to the multi-storied reality of children's lives, and the multi-storied construction of identity. To open possibilities and explore alternative descriptions, questions need to be asked to deconstruct the constitutive meaning of everyday language.

### **How does sexuality fit in understanding children's identities?**

This question might be uncomfortable for some readers, as they could sit with concern that I am promoting sexualisation of children. This is not so. My intention is to develop

the concept of children's identities as shaped and developed within social and cultural contexts. Children's sexual identity is shaped by and within (among others) families, schools, play and in relationship to media. Wherever there is language, action, silence, distraction, hyperbole and metaphor related to sexuality in its range of representations (i.e., humanity, spirituality, sacredness, sensuality, touching, suggestiveness, intercourse, procreation, pornography and abuse, etc), then children are immersed in a milieu that introduces and promotes understandings and meanings of sexuality. In these settings children's identities are developed in relationships with adults and children, parents and teachers, television programmes and advertisements, children's games and social negotiating of peer relationships, in addition to the specific environment of sibling and other familial and social settings.

Much of the research literature does not acknowledge children as sexual beings but suggests that sexuality only becomes part of a child's life at puberty and children are considered asexual until that developmental "stage". There is sometimes an avoidance of child sexuality by simply not naming or acknowledging sexuality in childhood, or referring to children's sexuality as "latent". There is clearly a tension between constructions of childhood and constructions of sexuality, and the construction of sexual identity. (I am taking "sexual identity" as meaning an identity the child may claim as a sexual being—and not as a definition of sexual orientation.)

One discourse is that of childhood innocence and ignorance tying in with a biological understanding of immaturity. This discourse sits comfortably with other discourses of science and gender, where a dominance of quantitative research describes "normative" data, "normal" sexual development and behaviour—and by definition, all that comes outside of the norm is "abnormal".

### **How do dominant discourses shape identity?**

Whether there is an understanding of children as sexual beings, what happens when the two opposing sexuality discourses that Burr named (normal/perverted) shape the lives of children?

Dominant discourses of sexuality continually intersect with discourses on childhood(s). The change in emphasis on morality between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries and the effects this had for families saw children given "special treatment" (see Ariès, 1962). Two childhood images arose—the demoniac child and the innocent child, emphasising guilt and original sin versus innocence. Within social and education systems, sexual practices and how sex could be spoken became more closely regulated. A new understanding of what was immoral was now being seen to be "unnatural".

Psychological and education services in New Zealand promote understandings of child sexuality that are located in western cultural thinking and practices. Ideas of how sexuality is traditionally enacted in people's lives have been determined through moral and legal prescriptions and in marriage. Such regulated thinking and practices are culturally bound. Changes in societal perceptions and behaviours have brought about an environment that is more open to, and reasonably accepting of, diverse sexual identities, practices and relationships.

However, in response to the awareness of child abuse, one position remains dominant: that any "sexualised" language or action in children is seen as a possible sign of abuse. A question of "deviancy" is almost automatic in the context of children and

sexual activity. Family and official responses are therefore positioned to suspect foul play, and explore questions of whom with, where, when, and how a child came to act in this way.

The surveillance practices adopted within the policies and procedures in social services and educational centres are determined by ideas, which find their origin within the history of responses to adults who “offend”. As understandings of work with adult sex offenders grew, these knowledges were taken and applied in work with adolescent offenders and many of the ideas and descriptions then used in the context of children's sexual activity. In recent years, the theories and treatment approaches for therapy with adults were identified as inappropriate for young offenders. So too, the approaches used for adolescents are not appropriate for children. The language used to describe actions and identities for children engaged in sexual activity (whether playful, harmful or otherwise) should take into account that this activity is socially, culturally, and politically located. The child's context is specific, as are the relationships that co-construct meaning in this child's life—including the relationship with the other child with whom she/he acts sexually.

#### Constructions of children as (sexually) playful

As children develop they are likely to explore their own bodies and those of others. There are studies that delineate “normal” sexual behaviour for various age groups depending on age and developmental level (Friedrich et al., 1991; Johnson, 1999). While these studies have contributed to thinking about what can be accepted and understood within children's learning, one response has been to use this information like a manual—so that actions outside of these are deemed “abnormal” and taken to be of concern, possibly indicative of abuse or deviancy (AACAP, 1999). Sexual play among children is acceptable to adults who draw on discourses that position children as innocent, ignorant, or immature. These understandings suggest children are presexual or asexual, and support an identity construction of “normal” and “natural” childhood. Games within this thinking are *mothers and fathers*, *doctors and nurses*, and *you show me yours and I'll show you mine*. The thinking here is that a child is not aware or interested in sexuality unless introduced—and the “introduction” to sexual interest or awareness is crucial to whether the event is abusive or harmful (for example, Postman, 1994).

#### Constructions of children as (sexually) “damaged”

The literature on sexual abuse of children tells of the enormous range of possible outcomes for children who are abused (e.g., see Sanderson, 2004). The effects for some can be totalising of their lives, while others appear to “recover” and are able to live without traumatic consequences. There is ongoing research related to social, familial and resiliency factors (among others) that support children during and following sexual abuse. A feature of “child sexual behaviour” is often the question of whether a child has been sexually abused. This myth-conception frequently leads to parental anxiety that an abused child might proceed to abusing and offending other children.

#### Constructions of children as (sexual) offenders

Media and news items frequently report stories of children engaging in sexual behaviour with other children as offenders and perpetrators, drawing on the language used about adult offenders. This has led to an increasing discourse of moral panic in

the NZ media about children's sexuality, with themes taken up about sexuality and children as abusers, offenders, and criminals. Children's sexual activity is thought of in adult terms, and within these thin descriptions, the space for children to articulate their own meanings is absent (Flanagan, 2010b). Unfortunately, too often this construction of children's sexual activity is taken up within school and social service contexts.

### **Positioning within multiple discourses on children and sexuality in "Jason's story"**

When considering Jason's story, a range of the multiple discourses and positions within discourses for the characters unfold.

The possibility of the principal's positionings within this story could be shaped by multiple stories within discourses that he/she finds him/herself in. Discourses of gender, culture, sexuality, class, safety management, parenting, and "the best interests of the child", among others, are some of these discursive frameworks in which principals, teachers, boards of trustees and parents find themselves.

The discourses of "natural" and "normal" childhood in contrast to "abnormal" and "deviant" for Jason may have easily been taken up by the principal and principals of the other schools where Jason's parents attempted to enrol him.

The principal's decision to exclude Jason raises questions about the intentions for this action, and what ideas informed them. What ideas of childhood(s) and education may the principal hold and what this might mean for a child's explorations, boundary crossings and social *faux pas* that may be viewed as part of child development and learning about social and cultural relationships? What ideas of support or hope, if any, were provided for Jason? Or was it thought that this was his parents' problem, and they needed to sort it out?

In choosing to exclude Jason, was the principal mindful of safety concerns? A child protection discourse may be apparent with thinking that removal of a potential/actual "sexual toucher" within the school community is providing safety for the remaining children. What safety in fact is afforded other children if there is no response within a context, or at least for Jason himself? Or could it be a reactive response, fearful of a backlash from a socially middle-class and conservatively minded rural parental community, which may be hostile to accommodating families that tend not to fit in to that community? Another "pressure" could be the expectation by the board of trustees that any aberrant behaviour should not be tolerated and that such behaviour has no place in their community. Within education discourses, principals are immersed in multiple power relations (parents, board of trustees, government ministry, teaching staff) in which they are positioned by expectations for a "safe and healthy environment", a "good reputation/name", achievement and success, and accountabilities, all having an effect on how they respond.

Each of us swims within an ocean of gender discourses that have effects for our understandings and actions. In Jason's context, was the male principal's choice of action determined through a myriad of cultural expectations about the leadership role in the school community, as well as possible reactions as a heterosexual man and a parent? Perhaps the principal has a child in the school community and did not want "this kind of experience" or "this kind of boy" around. Gendered discourses related to homosexuality

and males engaging in sexual activity with other males could possibly be taken up by the principal or others in the school community.

Jason's parents were positioned within a range of discourses that invited judgment and contributed to social isolation in this particular community. As a young, unemployed and unmarried couple, they were "known" to have frequent parties and associations with excessive alcohol and drugs: an impression was formed about their dubious ability as parents. "Evidence" for school staff to support this notion came through when Jason's homework wasn't completed, or his lunch was not "adequate". Criticisms related to "not fitting in" and subsequent concern for the safety of children in the school with Jason's presence created a community mindset about them.

Jason's voice is strikingly absent. Understanding what had happened and why was taken up by a number of adults, especially education and social service professionals. Jason was strongly positioned in this scenario by the adult-offending discourses of "sex offender", which are sustained by media reporting and community ideas of sexual abusers applied to adolescents, then applied to children. It seems as if the boy-child Jason, who shared so many attributes with the other children at school, was not recognised. There is a tension of being a child in the school, yet seen through a discursive lens as sexual, and therefore different and dangerous. Jason also holds a space of being the conduit of response(s) related to both his parents' and his own non-conformity within this community.

### **Possibilities for alternatives when dominant discourses are troubled**

Access to different support for Jason came consequently from an assessment by a special education service. A new understanding about Jason's thinking and acting drew forth new approaches to working in school and social contexts. Rather than seeing Jason as a symptom of parental neglect and family dysfunction, which was expressed through antisocial behaviour, he was viewed and responded to as a boy with distinct learning needs and abilities. The sexual touching could be perceived as perhaps a number of non-aggressive or intentionally hurtful possibilities. Jason could have been trying to make a friend. He could have wanted to initiate play. He could have been genuinely curious about his own and others' genitals. We do not know whether the other boy may have initiated this activity? These or other possibilities cannot be discounted by adults when responding to children's sexual activity.

Jason's story, and many others in which children's sexual actions bring discomfort or fear for adults in positions of responsibility, invite responses of care, caution and collaboration: care for the child and family; caution within the tension of questioning abuse and yet not assuming or judging this to be so; and collaboration between all the adults whose words and actions have effects for the child.

This article has presented information for educators related to children's development and sexuality. It encourages a critical stance when forming opinions about a child's sexual actions, and not viewing sexual activity as a defining or totalising narrative about a child. Rather, readers are called to see these contextually and within a framework of multiple stories that tell of a child's identity.

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