

*“It’s all sorted now isn’t it?”*: Enactment of  
gender equity in the  
NZ Teacher-led Early Education Sector



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## The Fire-fighters and Ninja's at Centre

“that’s great, girls are allowed to use the boys dress-ups if they want”.



‘What a pretty princess ninja’

There were three pivotal conversations that have led me to gender equity research in the early years and specifically the importance that teach role plays in this.

The first two were overheard conversations in ECE centres. Already interested in gender I was shocked to overhear a teacher say to a young girl, who asked for help to put on a fire fighters outfit, that “that’s great, girls are allowed to use the boys dress-ups if they want” and then another teacher at another centre responding to a girl attending in a martial arts outfit and declaring she was a ninja ‘What a pretty princess ninja you are’. The girl in this case was pretty annoyed and asked if she ‘had to be a princess?’

I pondered about these incidents for some time before I came to realise the teacher while well intentioned the adults simply hadn’t identified the language used as potential limiting. That language might be shaping that child’s view of the fire fighters outfit and fire fighting in general as a “boy” thing or that by wearing it she might be crossing gender boundaries or the assumption that every little girl wants to be a Princess even if she is Ninja

## Senior colleague

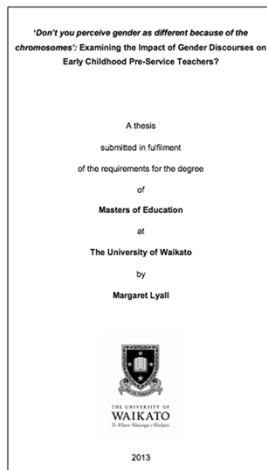
“It’s all sorted now isn’t it?”



This led me to several years of observing and reflecting on gender issues in early childhood education. The final comment that spurred me to continue with gender research was from a senior colleague after I declared my intention to continue with gender research at a doctoral level.

**“It’s all sorted now isn’t it?”** they asked reflecting the notion that gender equality is now a met target, a reality. This statement, which gave rise to the working title of my thesis, conflicted with my observations in early childhood centres. Gender certainly appeared to still be an issue. What would the young girl who might now think the fire fighter jackets were for boys say, is it all sorted?

## Master's Research



I found that the participant's gender discourses were conflicting, uncontested and confused. This finding suggested that further research is needed in order to explore the impact of messages and policies concerning gender. Messages and policies that are often themselves also identified as discordant, confusing and potentially trivialising, a phenomenon previously identified by several early childhood educational theorists.

Here I explored pre-service early childhood education teacher's gender discourses and how this might impact pedagogy and the developing teacher subject. I found that the participant's gender discourses were conflicting, uncontested and confused suggesting that further research is needed in order to explore the impact of messages and policies concerning gender.

Messages and policies that are often themselves also identified as discordant, confusing and potentially trivialising, a phenomenon previously identified by several early childhood educational theorists (Browne, 2004; Gunn, 2008; McNaughton, 2000).

Further a close reading of government early childhood education policy documents and associated texts carried out during my Masters research revealed the emergence of a pattern in which gender issues are marginalised (Gunn, 2013; Lyall, 2013).

This finding was echoed in research into the compulsory education sector (Simon-Kumar, 2011) and internationally (McNaughton, 2000; Skelton, 2007). Considering this and the high frequency with which ECE teacher's face issues

relating to gender and sexuality (Kelly, 2012) it is troubling that issues relating to gender continue to be conflicting, uncontested and marginalised.

## Participants Location and Framing of Gender

**Sam** *I see a difference between gender and sexuality but not between gender and sex*

**Shelly** *Yeah from what I've been brought up in and what I've been taught throughout uni sex, is you know, the difference between male and female and gender is pretty much the same*

**Anna** *Gender is to do with, it's more to do with your DNA, chronological stuff. I don't know, don't you perceive gender as different because of the chromosomes?*

**Dianne** *Yeah I always thought gender was the word people used if they didn't want to use sex on questionnaires*

**When looking at gender dispositions I looked at 2 main areas idea's around gender norms, Participants Location and Framing of Gender and their gender development discourses**

Looking at language was central especially within a Foucauldian discourse analysis which is complex (Garrity, 2010). It recognizes that language is always situated in discourse language and can therefore be a vehicle for analysis (Garvey, 1989).

### **The Participants Location and Framing of Gender**

Participants used language relating to gender issues in a surprisingly varied way. The way in which the participant's defined sex and gender indicated that some participants struggled to incorporate the language in a way that is consistent with the early childhood education sector and their teacher education programme. Just over half of the participant's defined the concepts of sex and gender in-line with the dominant discourses of the education sector while the remaining participants defined the terms in a number of different ways that appeared confused, often using language which seemed to conflict with their earlier statements.

## What did my participants think about gender & play?

My participants did not identify that children's own values might impinge on play choice inferring that they saw no potential issues in availability or expectations around choice concerning gender norms or gender divergent play.



### How social values can impact on play choice

My participants did not identify that children's own values might impinge on play choice inferring that they saw no potential issues in availability or expectations around choice concerning gender norms or gender divergent play.

One way you can see the value laden nature of play clearly is in children acting as **gender police**.

We can see the impact of this gender modelling when we see children act as "Gender police" with other children and adults, you can play with the trucks you're a girl and girls can't be truck drivers" (FLY IN PICTURE ONE) or "boys can't be at home with the babies all daddies go to work". " (FLY IN PICTURE ONE)

Several of my participants described situations in which they noted that student's acted to gender normalise the actions or beliefs around gender of other students but they didn't tie this into children's agency or choice around play.

# Teacher / Student Agency

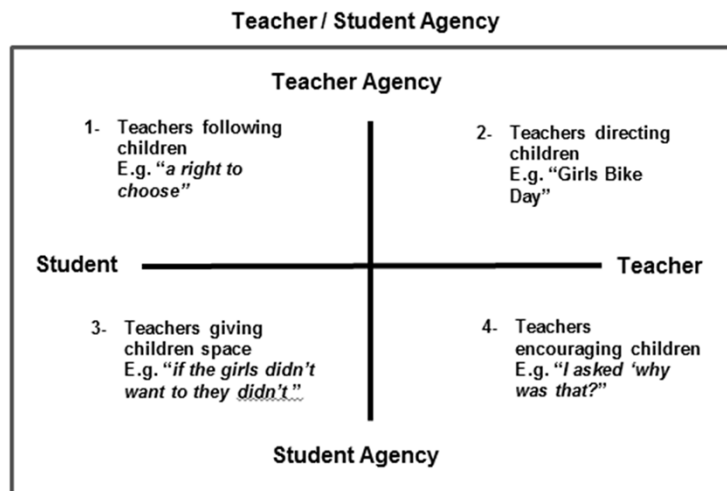


Figure 4. Teacher/Student Agency Chart Adapted from Stover et al (2012)

Participants in the current study identified all of these positions as pedagogy they had observed or engaged in and privileged these positions quite differently and I will explain each of these positions. I think that if you all reflected on these positions and your practice you may well find that at certain times you have used all of them in your pedagogy but the key Stover et al would propose is to develop the ability to move around the positions dependant on the children's best interests.



## Option 1 – Teachers Following Children

This option locates teachers as following children. This position was privileged by my participants who saw it as the dominant or 'true' pedagogy in ECE



### **Option one is....**

Locates teachers as following children. This position was privileged by my participants who appeared to see it as the dominant or "correct" pedagogy or 'true' pedagogy in ECE

My participants described this in many ways. I'm sure many of you can easily think of examples when you have either seen or practiced this approach.

## Option 2 – Teachers Directing Children

This option saw teachers as directing children. This position was not privileged by my participants and appeared infrequently in the research



This option saw teachers as directing children. This position was not privileged by my participants and appeared infrequently in the research.

While this position provides scope for teachers to challenge gender equity the reduction of children's agency reduced the positions popularity as participants appeared to consider it not in keeping with sector practice, the participants mostly described noticing this option when teachers practiced a sexist approach to gender equity not by those who practiced positive gender equity.

Paints example boys should use blue

## Option 3 – Teachers Giving Children Space

This option identified teachers as giving children space and was privileged by the participant's. It places the onus on children directing own their own interests making it the children's responsibility to create an equitable curriculum.



### **Position 3.**

Identified teachers as giving children space. Like position 1. this position was privileged by the participant's. And places the onus on children directing own their own interests making it the children's responsibility to create an equitable curriculum.

Position 3, in which children self-direct play did not appear to take into account the value laden nature of play. Although participant's acknowledged peer influence around gender and gender norming they did not appear to reflect on how this may impact children's agency and ability to self-direct play.

The kids will sort this out themselves

## Option 4 – Teachers Encouraging Children

Option 4, teacher's encouraging children, was described in practice in my research but not identified as a pedagogical practice by participants in my research



Option 4. teacher's encouraging children was not specifically referred to by my participants as a specific pedagogical position by the participants but rather was revealed in the participant's discourse concerning pedagogical practices around gender experiences during their practicum experience.

When the participant's described ways in which they challenged gender norming in centres they identified reducing norming through encouraging but not directing children. Despite this position being identified through discourse analysis as used by the participants, it was not directly identified as a pedagogical approach nor was it privileged, rather, it appeared to be unacknowledged as a specific practice.

For example if a boy wont use the pink cups ask him why, who says that boys can't like pink "I like blue and I'm a girl"

## Moving about the Options

Stover et al (2012) suggests teachers may need to move more fluidly and assertively and often simultaneously between positions to address the way on which the values, roles and expectations of society are addressed and this is certainly true of gender play and how this impacts children's developing discourses of gender.



The participants in my research appeared to assume that all play was accessible it may be that this influenced the positions of teacher agency they appeared to be privileging rather than that for some play for some children might be problematic and need further support.

If the participant's perceived play using a more complex approach the play it may be likely that they would perceive more of the teacher agency positions suitable for teachers and develop the ability to move around the positions dependant on the children's best interests as Stover et al (2012) suggests.

When considering play teachers may need to move more fluidly and assertively and often simultaneously between positions to address the way on which the values, roles and expectations of society are addressed and this is certainly true of gender play and how this impacts children's developing discourses of gender. The participants appeared to make no connection between shifting teacher positions and gender or that gender issues may call for specific pedagogical responses.

So what am I researching this time?

## **How is gender equity understood & (en)acted in the NZ ECE Teacher-led context?**

- **How do (or do) teachers recognise or understand gender equity policy?**
- **How do teachers directly or indirectly practice gender equity?**
- **What are the implications for this on relationships, pedagogy and practice?**

While the masters looked at pre-service teachers I am now working with participants who are or have been working in the sector:

I am in the early days of this project so there is still a chance to be involved

Overall I want to explore:

How is gender equity understood & (en)acted in the NZ ECE Teacher-led context?

How do (or do) teachers recognise or understand gender equity policy?

How do teachers directly or indirectly practice gender equity?

What are the implications for this on relationships, pedagogy and practice?

## How?

I propose that while raising awareness around gender equity in ECEC is a necessary step it is not enough to ensure equitable practice.

We need to engage with and explore alternative discourses of gender equity and teaching, looking for and developing discourses which are *truly* inclusive.

As such my research will start by deconstructing the dominant narratives around gender equity in the sector today. An example of this would be the discourse supporting, in some (many) parts of the world, the view that it is more 'natural' for woman, rather than men, to be ECEC teachers as women are the nurturing gender.

Raising awareness around gender equity practice in ECEC may not be enough although it is a necessary step.

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This view incorporates a number of discourses (which I will explain in a moment) such the essentialist view of gender traits as tied to biological sex, the maternalist view of the ECEC teachers as childminding rather than the more professional teaching,

## Theoretical perspectives

- **Feminism** – feminism is politics that aims to explore, challenge and unseat the position of women in society (Weedon, 1997)
- **Poststructuralist** – emphasises the fluidity of gender across time, place and socio cultural context (McNaughton, 2000)
  - **Foucault**
    - A geology of the past to reveal the present
    - Critical Discourse Analysis of texts, policy & interviews and focus groups





## Foucault on Power

- Foucault's work is especially interested in understanding how certain knowledges are created and disseminated and others are left.
  - Hidden relations of power present in the ideas, objects and text
  - Who is exercising the power, that is, whose discourses are being presented



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Hidden relations of power present in the ideas, objects and text

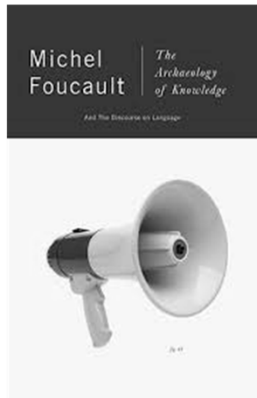
Who is exercising the power, that is, whose discourses are being presented

He sees Power as a complex set of relations that are not exclusively localized in any particular person or group, it spreads throughout the most micro levels of the social body.

Power is not simply repressive but it is productive & Power operates dynamically at the most micro levels of social relations.

these T-shirts for example which are made for all ages, children to adults, What power relationships can be identified here – who gets the power

## Discourses are:



- **Discourses** are more than ways of thinking and producing leaning.
- Foucault defined **Discourses** as ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which are a part of such knowledges and relations between them.
- Discourses construct what we perceive as 'truth'

# Data Generation

- Interviews
- Online focus group/forum 12 week
- Policy review of main texts



In order to achieve this I will be searching for participants who will be involved in data generation through a series on 2 interviews and participation in a 12 week online discussion group.

It will consist of a process of a 1 hour interview (I will come to the interviewees) followed by the online focus group with a final 1 hour interview (I will come to the interviewees) to end the process.

## What this research can do...

- To help develop a 'gender flexible pedagogy' with the potential to 'undo' the establishment of traditional gender performances and practices through an explicit focus on the creation of gender consciousness and gender activism.
- Help encourage a 'gender flexible pedagogy' involves the concurrent operation of preschool staffing policies Inc. the recruitment of more male teachers, teaching practices, relationships with children, and the provision of resources.

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- Provide a contribution to a growing body of research that explores of how gender is being transgressed (or not) so we can move away from a theoretical assumption that masculinity is necessarily aligned with men and femininity with women
- At a national level it could also implicate the need to embed a more developed gender focus within national curricula for early childhood education .



Provide a contribution to a growing body of research that explores of how gender is being transgressed (or not) so we can move away from a theoretical assumption that masculinity is necessarily aligned with men and femininity with women. The picture here is a classic example of that alignment with the blue dr coat for boys and the pink beautician coat for girls.

At a national level it could also implicate the need to embed a more developed gender focus within national curricula for early childhood education .

## So how is this relevant for male teachers?

While I recognise the gender transformative potential of male preschool teachers without considering the discourses already present in the ECEC sector I propose we might, in some circumstances, be ‘fighting blind’ in efforts to increase the number of men in the ECEC sector.



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There are a number of issues that I would like to explore around male teachers within this research. Issues that I believe might help both in providing a focus on gender equity within the ECEC sector that might also help to support men into the sector.

An example of one of the discourses I am interested in exploring is the what I call the “Male magic Bullet” for gender equity

## The discourse that increasing the number of male teachers will automatically create gender equity

- ‘The Male Teacher Magic Bullet’ response to gender equity in ECEC
- This is based upon the idea that just having men present in centres promotes gender equity. While I would agree that this rightly increases gender diversity – equity is a trickier issue.
- Often this argument relates to the discourse of male teachers as ‘role models’.



‘The Male Teacher Magic Bullet’ response to gender equity in ECEC or as I have heard it the ‘we don’t have to worry about gender equity – we have a male teacher’

This is based upon the idea that just having men present in centres promotes gender equity. While I would agree that this rightly increases gender diversity – equity is a trickier issue. Often this argument relates to the discourse of male teachers as ‘role models’, sometimes with this coming before them as a teacher, but even this is a tricky concept.

There are several potential elements to this discourse: all of which might be influencing the Power/Knowledge that influences what we know as truth

## Is this the Right idea for the Wrong reason?

- In terms of gender equity are we over-valuing the impact of male teachers as role models if there is no active policy and processes for gender equity for all staff



In terms of gender equity are we over-valuing the impact of male teachers as role models if there is no active policy and processes for gender equity for all staff

Especially considering the range of discourses shaping teachers, families and children.

For example:

Gender-based stereotyping is not only prevalent in centres but also reflected in the family, culture and society or both teachers and children. Teachers frequently form attitudes based on stereotyping acquired from their own upbringing and culture including male stereotypes that are often perceived as strong, active, hard and rational, while female stereotypes are perceived as weak, passive, soft and emotional.

So do we have to be actively practicing a 'gender flexible pedagogy' for this to work regardless of the gender of the teachers?



- Could the 'Male Bullet' discourse actually impose and reinforce a hyper-masculine gender role on male teachers therefore reinforcing concerns linked to homophobic discourses on male teachers expressing fragility, nurturing or an emotive role.
- In turn if children are only seeing stereotyped gender roles played out by staff this might actually negatively impacting notions of gender equity.



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I certainly have had some comments from some teachers around the "role" for male teachers

- Do rough and tumble with the boys so the girls can read quietly (wow the gender assumptions in this statement is a study one it's own)
- Sort out the carpentry
- Get balls down from the roof
- Handy man work around the centre &
- To be the disciplinarian in the centre



- Is this discourse actually a thin veneer over the stereotyped essentialised view of boys as logical and physical and girls as emotional and cerebral – a discourse which is recognised to have long-term negative impacts for both boys and girls
- Might this discourse actually de-professionalise male teachers making them more valued for their gender than their skills

Other aspects to consider are:

Is this discourse actually a thin veneer over the stereotyped essentialised view of boys as logical and physical and girls as emotional and cerebral – a discourse which is recognised to have long-term negative impacts for both boys and girls. Which has the potential to hamper recruitment as it may work to reinforce the women as nurturing discourse that places men as the 'other' and can therefore contribute to positioning men who choose this field as potentially suspect

Or

Might this discourse actually de-professionalise male teachers making them more valued for their gender than their skills & potentially hampering recruitment efforts.

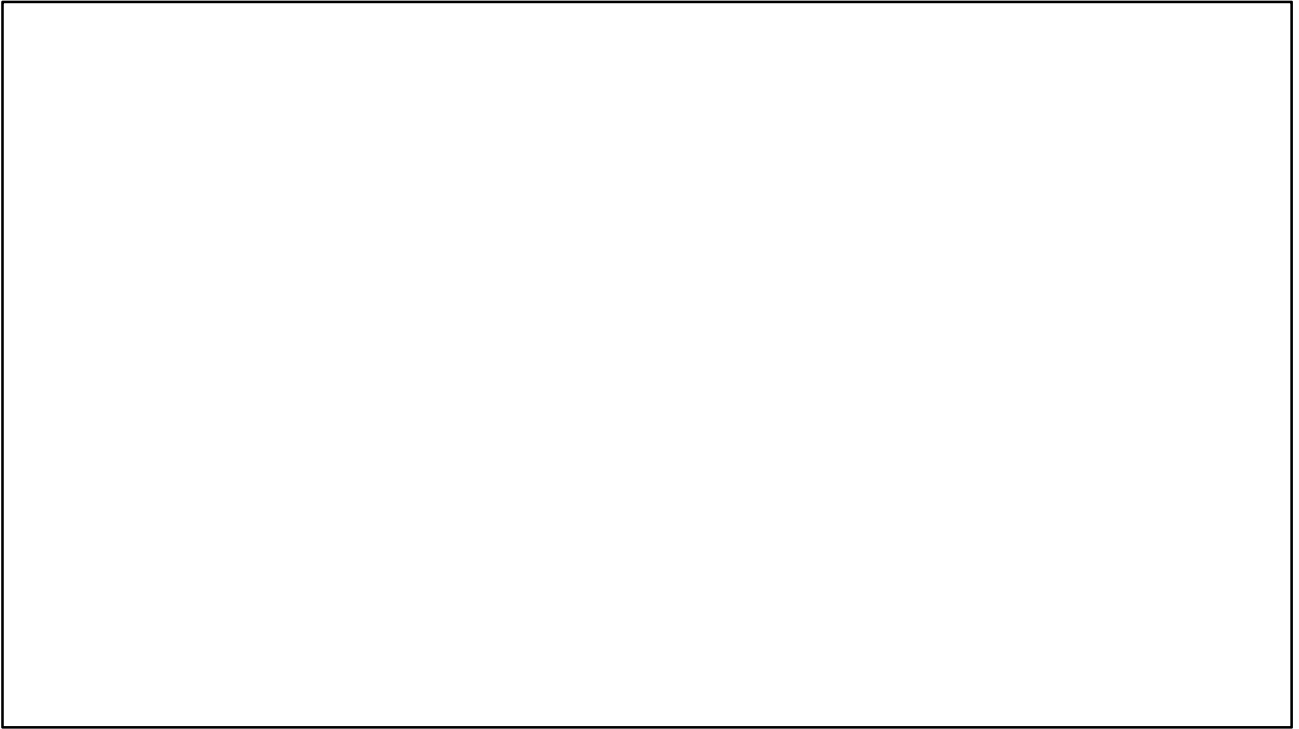
But as I said earlier this is work in progress and the participants may take me in directions I did not expect but I certainly hope that some of the teachers here will consider being a part of this project

*Thank you for your time*

Please contact me if you have any further questions

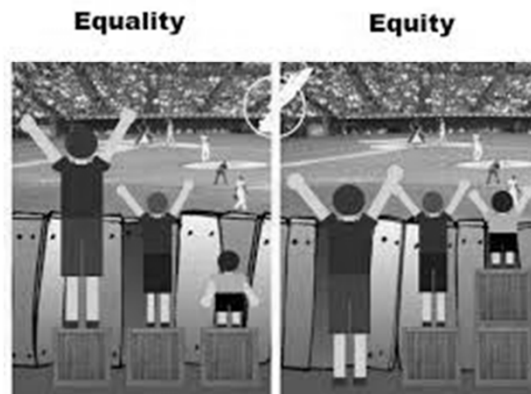
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## Gender Equity

- *What is the difference between gender equality and gender equity?*



## Gender Equity Stocktake

Answer the following questions in groups...

- *Give two examples of how you feel your institution might be reinforcing gender roles and gender inequality.*
- *Suggest practical ways of addressing these situations based on your current understanding of gender and that ensures gender equity in practice*

## Gender Equity Policy

Discuss with your group what gender equity policies we have in NZ Teacher-led ECEC?

- *Where is this located – where can you find this?*
- *How is/Is this incorporated in your center?*
  - *I.e. does your Centre have a policy on buying books with non-traditional gender roles shown?*