Editorial

Gender Issues in Early Childhood Education

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Once again, He Kupu features a practitioner researcher section dedicated to student and teacher contributions, a special edition, with a focus on gender issues in early childhood education, and a book review section. The variety in the practitioner researcher papers continues to impress. Jeong Eun Yang, who has a Bachelor of Education from New Zealand Tertiary College, opens our edition fittingly with a study of why there are so few male early childhood teachers in New Zealand. Kirsty Weir, who holds a Graduate Diploma from New Zealand Tertiary College, has written on partnerships in early childhood, considering the potential barriers and benefits drawn from effective practice in community building. Mark Smith, who took the Bachelor of Teaching degree at New Zealand Tertiary College, provides us with a salutary report on gifted children in early childhood education and, finally, Pukha Dhawan, a Graduate Diploma graduate from New Zealand Tertiary College, provides an opinion on developing literacy, including a reworking of what may be meant by the term.

The topic of gender enters into every aspect of early childhood education. While Arts education, literacy, information technology and the role of politics and policy are important – as featured in past He Kupu special editions - gender pervades all of these areas of early childhood. For example, what teachers consider as being culturally responsive in what they teach and how teachers configure their own being as early childhood educators involve decisions based on gender. This is aside from the perception of gender only in terms of male and female attributes and how both are viewed by teachers and children within the community. These issues are just some of the topics that are addressed in this special edition, observed within the scope of early childhood education.

The special edition begins by looking at the vexed question of men working in early childhood by Claire Cameron. This paper refers to some extensive studies undertaken in the EU examining gender, attitudes and practice. Institutionalised perceptions were found to be amongst the reasons for the low numbers of males in the workforce, in addition to concepts of ‘normality’ and male self-perception. This is humorously referenced in relation to such matters as staff room conversations and the male teacher being seen as the ‘practical’ person who ‘fixes things’. Interestingly, questioning the male stereotype was seen as part of the role for male teachers, as was seeing their role as teaching, rather than caring.

The move away from male and female descriptors to consider gender as a problematic is one of the points raised by Vivienne Hogan. In revisiting the challenge made by Glenda MacNaughton (1997), as to whether early childhood educators can acknowledge gender as an issue in their practice, a review is undertaken to establish what, if any, progress has been achieved in the intervening years. With reference to feminist poststructuralist research, the text
looks beyond the binary of male and female, to question practice and look to alternative and oppositional discourse. The difficulty of achieving this change is not underestimated in this paper. Citing a student teacher in MacNaughton’s literature (2010), the difficulty of students learning to adopt alternative approaches is discussed and, with reference to other studies, the case is made for a challenge to heteronormative bias.

From the EU and New Zealand, attention is turned to Japan in Rachel Burkes' paper looking at Japanese early childhood practice. This paper is a reflection on Burke’s personal experience of being a mother attending early childhood centres in Japan. The paper illustrates the demands made on mothers to comply with government and centre expectations. Indicative of these pressures include mothers showing care in the quality of foodstuffs and ‘lunch box’ supplied for the child. The level of oversight by the centre staff reveals a very judgemental micro-culture seen from a Western standpoint. While changes are being made, the oversight by the government on the centre and centre community still remains a significant factor in Japanese early childhood practice.

While institutions may be seen at fault in not being proactive enough in raising gender awareness, in Sweden this is far from the case. In Mia Heikkilä’s paper, she describes gender mainstreaming, which has resulted in raising awareness and the formulation of practice that challenges gender stereotypes. Reporting on a large scale, web based research project, Heikkilä explains that teacher involvement is critical to the success of implementing change in gender awareness. A surprising and innovative aspect of this study was seeking the response of the children, with changes in practice adopted as a result.

In another article from Scandanavia, Leif Askland considers the implementation of the Norwegian Kindergarten Act. This document legislates equal opportunity in kindergartens, extending to play and learning. In a research study following the implementation of the Kindergarten Act (2010/2013), Askland asserts that problems remain in how gender equity is enacted in Norway. As in Heikkilä’s study, gendered practice is seen as an individual response, while discussion and consultation amongst staff remains a vital part of assimilating change. With reference to a useful bank of questions and suggestions, the response to gender is seen as ongoing and constantly shifting.

A very different study is presented by Beverley Irby, Fuhui Tong, Barbara Polnick, Rafael Lara-Alecio and Yinan Fan. This study looks again at cultural indicators of gendered behaviour. This time, the focus is on gifted Hispanic bilingual students and teacher assessment. The question is raised as to whether bias operates in the selection of male or female children to enter the gifted programmes available. The results of this extended quantitative study reveal there was little overt bias being made in favour of females. However, the paper concludes that the cultural responsiveness of the research instruments need to be refined, to become more culturally specific before making this a conclusive finding.

on the child’s physical development with each chapter linking theory to practice. This is seen as ideal for beginner teachers interested in a developmental overview of early childhood education. Trish Thomas has provided a review of “The Thinking Child” (2013), another of the series “Foundations of Children’s Development.” As the title implies, this book focuses on children’s cognitive development. The interactive way of working with children catches the reviewer’s attention, as does the development of thinking supported through ongoing engagement with the individual child. With a section on multiple pedagogies, the challenges in developing ‘effective thinking’ is embraced. Both Michelle Gillespie and Trish Thomas recommend these publications to a New Zealand audience using Te Whāriki (1996).

Lata Rana reports on “Outdoor Learning” (2013) by Ann Watts. This book is recommended by virtue of the amount of varied information in utilising the outdoors. Activities such as working with the materials found outdoors and the sensory value of the outdoors are outlined in detail. Together with poems and advice to parents on developing outdoor activities, this book could be very valuable to those unsure if they are making the most of the opportunity to go outside. Sujatha Gomathinayagam has reviewed “Enhancing Early Childhood Development” (2013) by Durriyah Sinno, Lama Charafeddine and Muhamad Mikati. This book is intended for those who are primary care givers, though can be of value to parents and teachers wishing to learn more about interventions, with respect to children and cerebral palsy, autism or other psychological and behavioural determinations. The inclusion of a section on diet is seen as a very valuable addition to knowledge for those working in the field.

The editorial team would like to acknowledge all those who have contributed to this edition of He Kupu, which is by far the largest that has been undertaken. Our thanks go to all the contributors and to Melanie Thorne for her work as journal administrator and the review panel.

The next special edition of He Kupu will focus on the Move, Act, Play, Sing (MAPS) research study. Articles from academics and teachers working in early childhood education and the Arts are especially welcomed by March 1st 2014 deadline. The November 2014 edition is entitled Children’s Narratives, considering children and their narratives in talk, dramatic play, voice and all other forms. Submissions welcomed by August 1st 2014 deadline.

References


MacNaughton, G. (2000). Good teacher or feminist teacher: Rethinking the ethics of teaching in early childhood. In J. Jipson & R. Johnson (Eds.),


