Vivienne Hogan   Vivienne.hogan@aut.ac.nz

LOCATING MY TEACHING OF GENDER IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TEACHER EDUCATION WITHIN THE WIDER DISCOURSE OF FEMINIST PEDAGOGY AND POSTSTRUCTURALIST THEORY

Vivienne Hogan
AUT University, Auckland, New Zealand

Abstract

This article investigates how feminist pedagogy and poststructuralist theory can inform both teacher and student in the teaching and learning of gender in relation to teacher education. With reference to the author's own experience of teaching student teachers in early childhood education the article attempts to unravel the complex interface between learning and teaching when taking a deliberate feminist teaching position. The teaching of gender in this context is taught as part of a first year sociology paper which introduces students to feminist theory as a theoretical perspective on the family. The author's journeys reflects on how feminist and post - structuralist theory as a basis for teaching has both informed and unsettled the teaching/learning nexus in a teacher education programme.

Introduction

In my teaching, I have found that student teachers assume that gender in early childhood education is largely unproblematic. They appear to be gender 'blind,' resistant to exploring gender critically, seeing sex roles as being socially constructed and biologically stable. In order to challenge student's perceptions of gender I have adopted a feminist teaching positioning that requires us to make visible aspects of our own life histories. To this end I have I felt it important to articulate my own feminist trajectory and through my own reflections to find out what post-structuralist feminist teaching can do to me! Being mindful of the power relations that exist between student and teacher, I refer to post-structuralism and feminism not only as a group of theories but as an intentional approach to teaching and pedagogy. Through my reading of Taguchi's (2005) ideas about teaching I have become vigilant and wary of teaching from a perspective of wanting to emancipate the students without acknowledging their own identities and experiences. Through examples of my own journaling and an exploration of feminist pedagogy and postructuralist theory I attempt to navigate a pathway of teaching that creates spaces for honest, open and critical discussion on the topic of gender.

Locating myself as a feminist poststructuralist teacher

Feminist poststructuralist theory has been widely discussed in relation to education (Lather 1987, 1991; St Pierre and Pillow 2000; McLeod 2008) and more recently in relation to early childhood education by (Lenz Taguchi 2005; MacNaughton 1997; Greishaber 2007; Robinson & Diaz 2006). While it is generally agreed that feminist poststructuralist theory can inform our understanding of gender and how it is situated within education, it is more difficult to establish what feminist poststructuralist theory is (or is not). The term feminist poststructuralist can mean different things in different contexts. Elizabeth St Pierre and Pillow (2000) argue that 'Feminism is a highly contested term, as is post-structuralism, so it is impossible to produce a comfortable synthesis from those vertiginous locations' (p477).

Vivienne Hogan   Vivienne.hogan@aut.ac.nz

While McLeod (2008) in her paper *legacies of post-structural feminism in education,* tracks the complex relationship between post-structuralism and feminism:

> Of course, neither poststructuralism, nor feminism, nor any alliance between the two   represents a homogenous body of theory or practice or politics. Nor has it been taken up in educational research in a single or monolithic way, even if it is sometimes   characterised, or caricatured as such. There are variations in theoretical emphasis and differences in the type of practices to which it is linked across research, teaching, history, policy, pedagogy, methodology (p3).

Robinson and Diaz (2006) writing about early childhood education suggest that feminist poststructuralism can be helpful in supporting student teachers to 'negotiate and construct their own identities, to challenge normalising discourses that operate on micro and macro levels in their lives, and to demonstrate how individual subjects are instrumental in the perpetuation of social inequalities'(p17).

In identifying the different feminist perspectives Grieshaber (2007) describes feminist poststructuralists as opposing 'an essentialized gendered way of knowing and argue instead that gender is discursively produced. Rather than one gender identity, individuals including teachers and children perform a number of gendered ways of knowing and being that depend on the social context and the meanings circulating within a set of social relationships' (p7/8).

As a teacher educator I have found both feminist and poststructuralist theory has an immediate resonance for me in relation to my own journey in teacher education. Throughout my initial training as a nursery nurse (in the UK), and subsequent career as a qualified teacher, I was acutely aware of feeling enframed by being in a feminised occupation which was generally perceived as 'glorified' babysitting. As a result of this, I have felt some ambivalence about preparing students to become early childhood education teachers. On the one hand I celebrate the enhanced status of early childhood teachers through the growing professionalization of early childhood education, while on the other I wish to emancipate the students to an awareness of what Vincent and Braun (2010) identify as child care being "both a site of agency and a site of boundaries" (p212).   In their study of working class young women choosing to study early childhood education Vincent and Braun found that the choice of child care did not necessarily offer them the ticket to 'adulthood' that they initially envisaged:

> Whilst the girls are, for the most part, choosing childcare with enthusiasm, choosing to work for qualifications, and seeing further education, training and employment   opportunities as open to them, their investment of themselves is in an occupational   site which remains one defined by low status and poor pay and conditions (especially in the private sector) (p211).

In her work on feminist post structuralism and teaching Lather (1987) identifies feminist scholarship as playing a significant historical link between the gendered role of education and the wider gender relations in society. Furthermore, Lather argues that feminist scholarship has enhanced our understanding of gender as part of a wider reproduction of classed, raced and gendered workers. In developing my teaching of gender I have incorporated a strong feminist focus, which acknowledges an historical positioning of women and their role in the family.

 Lenz Taguchi (2005) asks the question how feminist pedagogy is different from other forms of pedagogy. She writes "More specifically I explore how student teachers, as well as the teacher educators teaching them, are invented in early childhood teacher education; and perhaps reinvented by feminist poststructuralist-inspired practices"(p245).   While reading Lenz Taguchi's ideas about teaching it became apparent that I was teaching from a perspective of wanting to 'emancipate' the students in front of me without necessarily acknowledging their own identities and experiences. I was in danger of subjecting students to what Lenz Taguchi describes as 'self-regulatory practices in relation to dominant discourses of gender, ethnicity, social, position, and sexuality' (2005,p246).

Vivienne Hogan   Vivienne.hogan@aut.ac.nz

Disrupting my own teaching

Over a period of three years it became important to me to explore why I was often coming away from the lectures feeling a mixture of anger and disappointment. It took me some time to understand that the fault was not with the students. In an attempt to understand more fully what was happening in the lectures I kept a 'teaching' journal. On reflection it was clear that I was in a hurry to get the students to engage with the ideas of feminist and poststructural theory and from there to 'critique' and disrupt what were often essentialised ideas about gender. By encouraging the students to question some of the 'taken for granted' truths about gender I assumed they would then go on to explore beyond the dominant heteronormative and binary discourses of gender in education. It was initially a surprise to me that there was such overt resistance, however, in retrospect I understand that for the students their perception was of being 'lectured to' by a radical feminist!

I strongly identified with the process writings of Lenz Taguchi as she reflected on her experience of teaching*:* "I just want them to understand everything the way I understand it, so I don't have to work so bloody hard to encounter each of their understandings!" (2005, p248).   Similarly I wanted to get the students to engage with the ideas of feminism and poststructuralism so that they could examine their own positioning as women in a predominantly feminised occupation and subsequently be able to reflect on their teaching when they went out on practicum.

Lenz Taguchi (2005) alerts us to the dangers of asking the students to engage with the learning from a 'personal' perspective warning that 'On the contrary, the personal can be understood as *getting in the way of* learning'(p249). While she was writing about the students in this instance I wondered if this is what was happening to me. By identifying so closely with gender and feminism was I also *getting in the way* of my own teaching and the students learning? An early extract from my journal is an example of this:

> *I came in prepared to engage the students in the same way – making some very naïve assumptions along the way. I assumed that the students would not only know what gender (and feminism!) was about but that also that they would be as interested in it as I was. I also assumed that even if they had not lived through the heady days of the first wave feminist movements that they would at least have an understanding of the legacy of the early feminists (e.g. in NZ Kate Sheppard and others) and be able to link their own experiences with the wider situation of women in society. When my questions and provocations were met with a bemused silence I felt both perplexed and deeply disappointed (August 2010).*

My assumptions that the students would share my enthusiasm for debunking stereotypic ideas about gender roles was curbed by a realisation that for many students the topic was at best of little interest and more often seen as superfluous to teaching. This did not quite fit with my view of teaching for social justice and indeed challenged the very core of my beliefs about my role as a teacher educator.

Robinson and Diaz (2006) have also described the teaching of gender as being problematic and requires teacher educators to acknowledge that for many students their understanding of the discourses around gender are often based on commonly held beliefs and stereotypes that are reinforced through media and cultural identity. To what extent individual subjects have agency in the construction of self and social relationships is a significant question in feminist poststructural theory and pedagogy (Robinson and Diaz, 2006).

Teaching for social justice and gender equity

As I explored the research on teaching social justice it soon became clear that student discontent and resistance to learning about social theory is well documented. In their research Stephenson and Rio (2009) have looked at student teachers resistance to engaging with social theory and 'complex theoretical concepts' in sociology. They have found that their attempts to disrupt the myth of gender neutrality in New Zealand can illicit strong responses from student teachers. Diem and Helfenbein

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(2008) have also written about the challenges of unsettling beliefs to 'help people learn new ways of seeing a familiar world' which the authors concede is 'no easy task' (p xii). Mahoney (1996) suggests that students go through levels of awareness when grappling with new information about the meaning and existence of female inequality in their own discipline. For instance an initial refusal to acknowledge that inequality persists today rather it happened in the past and is no longer relevant.

In early childhood education gender is primarily situated within the wider discourse of social justice through a commitment to diversity and equity, gender being one aspect of the diversity and equity discourse. The move from equal opportunities to inclusivity has evolved as part of the wider discourse on children's rights and an appreciation that equity requires an explicit commitment in practice in addition to policy.

The expression of gender equity is articulated in the New Zealand early childhood curriculum Te Whāriki to 'ensure that learning opportunities are not restricted by gender, locality or economic restraints' (Ministry of Education, 1996, p17). In the New Zealand curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) gender equity is defined in terms of providing a curriculum, which is non-sexist, non-racist and non-discriminatory. The political and social commitment to gender equity is variously manifested in different contexts for example in Sweden and other Scandinavian countries equal opportunities for girls is clearly articulated and mandated through Government policy (Lenz Taguchi, 2005, Karlson and Simmonson, 2011). In New Zealand teachers are expected to demonstrate an awareness of equity and develop strategies for inclusive teaching as written into the Graduating Teacher Standards (GTS). Thus there is an expectation student teachers will learn how to teach in ways that supports equity for children and staff that promotes and supports individual learning.

While there has been some research into the relationship between gender equity and practice in the primary and secondary school in New Zealand there has been less research in the context of early childhood education. Research in Australia by MacNaughton (1997) and others has found that early childhood teachers are often missing or 'fail to see' the significance of gender in children's learning. In their research Lee-Thomas, Sumsion and Roberts (2005) found that teachers' understandings of gender equity were 'heavily grounded' in socialisation theory and that there was' little consideration of the child's ability to adopt multiple and contradictory gender positions' (p21). Their findings echo MacNaughton in calling for alternative ways of thinking about gender through feminist poststructuralist theory and pedagogy. She goes on to say that 'until they reconstruct their pedagogic gaze in and via feminist discourses, they do not see gender as fundamentally constitutive in children's learning (p321). Blaise and Andrew (2005) in their research advocating a more proactive role for early childhood education teachers in challenging dominant discourses of gender put some of the responsibility for the students' 'failure to see' on teacher educators suggesting that they need to be prepared to be 'controversial' and encourage students to 'get uncomfortable and shift their thinking' (p56).

Challenging early childhood education as a neutral site for gender

There is a common belief amongst the student teachers that early childhood education is a neutral site in relation to gender. While there is an acknowledgement that society can influence young children to behave in more or less gendered ways there is also a strong perception that early childhood teachers can mitigate these influences by creating an environment that celebrates diversity and offers all children equal opportunities.

As a way to demonstrate 'equal opportunities' in early childhood education teachers often provide gender-neutral resources and create gender neutral play areas 'free' to both boys and girls. However in her research MacNaughton (1997) reveals much more subtle aspects of gender stereotyping that are not simply mitigated by offering a range of non-stereotypic resources. She demonstrates how teachers in early childhood education often fail to recognise the importance of gender in children's daily lives. Yet according to Robinson and Diaz (2006) early childhood education teachers are in an ideal position to make a positive difference in the lives of children and their families by 'challenging and disrupting normalizing discourses through the curriculum that we teach and the policies that inform our practice

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and pedagogies that we utilize in teaching children.' (p8). While this is acknowledged by MacNaughton (1997) she goes on to warn that 'until they reconstruct their pedagogic gaze in and via feminist discourses, they do not see gender as fundamentally constitutive in children's learning (p321).

Teaching as women's work

Another dominant discourse on gender in early childhood education is that teaching young children is 'women's' work. In his report *Workforce Issues in Early Childhood Education and Care,* Moss (2000) writes that early childhood work is one of the most highly gendered of occupations. He goes on to suggest that the issue of so few men in early childhood education is important and requires further attention. Moss identifies two important reasons for paying attention to gender in early childhood education one that the gendered nature of the work reinforces our understanding of the work as substitute mothering that women are naturally suited to*.* He also suggests resistance to men working in early childhood education is partly "constructing the work as something women are 'naturally' good at, while men are 'unnaturally' suited to the work" (Moss, 2000, p12). In my discussion with first year student teachers the perception of women being more *naturally* suited to early childhood education is certainly prominent despite a general consensus that having more men in teaching would be beneficial.

Other research has explored the relationship between the 'failure' of boys in education to the feminised nature of teaching (Alloway 1995; Alloway & Gilbert, 2002; Titus, 2004). This anxiety about boys failing has been actively taken up in the New Zealand media most recently in the New Zealand Herald declaring that women teachers are responsible for boys failing (New Zealand Herald).

In relation to teaching in higher education there has been some interesting research on the challenges of feminist teaching (Ropers-Huilman, 1998; Middleton, 1995; Carillo, 2007). Much of this literature is based on feminist teaching of women's studies and how feminist theory is 'lived' in the classroom. Other work by Carillo (2007) is concerned with student responses to feminist teaching and exploring how and if authority should be played out in a feminist teacher's classroom.

Research on student's perceptions of teaching as a career reveal a complex interplay of on the one hand the public devaluing of child care as a profession alongside the continuing professionalization of early childhood education teachers in many countries. In their research Kim and Reifel (2010) make a strong case for further research which explores the paradoxes experienced by many early childhood education student teachers between the social expectations of 'childcare' workers and their own beliefs as teachers. In their research as in my own it is clear that many student teachers are very aware of these paradoxes but have difficulty in expressing them. In their findings Kim and Reifel call for opportunities to be provided for student teachers to explore these paradoxes so that they can develop 'possible models of reaction and empowerment of practice' (p244).

Conclusion

While there has been much written about teaching from and about feminist poststructuralist theory there has been less written directly relating to teaching student teachers in early childhood education from a feminist poststructuralist perspective particularly in relation to the New Zealand context. Jones (1997) describes vividly her attempts to teach and the subsequent failure of student teachers to fully grasp poststructuralist feminist theory. Jones is struck by how the students despite her teaching concepts such as *positioning* and *subjectivity* still seem to be stuck in their use of these ideas. Robinson and Diaz (2006) have provided a strong argument for teaching from a feminist poststructuralist perspective in early childhood education citing the need for teachers who can develop reflexivity about their understanding and perceptions of gender in the daily context of their work with young children and constantly question their pedagogical practices and interactions with children.

Vivienne Hogan   Vivienne.hogan@aut.ac.nz

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