

*Youth Research Centre  
Melbourne Graduate School of Education  
University of Melbourne*

*Occasional Paper*

## **A determined advocate: learning from Elizabeth Dau in Early Childhood**



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# Introduction

Glenda Mac Naughton

(Founding Director, Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood,  
The University of Melbourne)

This occasional paper honors the work of Elizabeth (Lib) Dau (1942–2015) and her contribution to championing principles of equity and respect for diversity in early childhood through her untiring and determined advocacy of the anti-bias approach to early childhood in Australia.

Elizabeth was an Honorary Research Fellow of the University of Melbourne’s Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood (CEIEC). This work sat amongst extensive experience in the early childhood field that gave her deep and practical insights into the daily life and dynamics of the field. Her work included various posts in the Australian Capital Territory school system and work as Assistant National Director of the Australian Early Childhood Association (now known as Early Childhood Australia), Program Manager of the Northern Territory Children’s Services Resource and Advisory Program and Head of the Child Studies Department at the Canberra Institute of Technology. She retired in 2002 from her Advanced Skills Lecturer’s position at Regency TAFE, Adelaide to focus on consultancy work in the early childhood field in which she continued her determined advocacy for an anti-bias approach across all aspects of the field—management, training and educational practices with children.

Elizabeth’s work was prolific. She was a widely published author and she edited many books including, *The Anti-Bias Approach in Early Childhood* (Dau & Creaser, 1995), which is now entering its third edition. At the time of its publication it was the first early childhood textbook in Australia to focus in-depth on aspects of diversity such as gender, race, and language within Australian society and provide practical strategies for working with families and staff to challenge bias in their existing attitudes and practices. The term ‘anti-bias education’ was new to many in the field and this book launched a generation of early childhood practitioners into their first engagement with recognising and taking action against issues of sexism, racism, homophobia and disability bias in their daily work with children, colleagues and families. The book was designed to make a difference to the daily dynamics of life between children, staff and parents and it clearly came from Elizabeth’s own deep experience of working in the field. Key features of the book included case studies showing anti-bias principles in action from early childhood practitioners, questions for discussion between colleagues and parents and a glossary of key terms for those new to the issues raised in the book. Now, 20 years after its publication the term ‘anti-bias’ is well known to many in the early childhood field and the need to address issues of equity and respect in the field has a substantial research base behind it, much of which has been generated by practitioner–researchers inspired to research their own practice as a result of their engagement with Dau and Creaser (1995).

In 2004, Julia Miller interviewed Elizabeth in the Australian lesbian and gay life stories oral history project. This interview is available in the National Library of Australia for personal and research purposes and can be found at: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn6563717>

This occasional paper honors Elizabeth's anti-bias advocacy in the early childhood field through:

- personal reflections from three former members of the CEIEC on Elizabeth's contribution to their understandings of the anti-bias approach in early childhood;
- republishing copies of the CEIEC Equity Issues Papers and Members' Issues Paper to which Elizabeth contributed as part of her work as an Honorary Research Fellow in the CEIEC with the aim of making them more widely available; and
- gathering together a selected bibliography of Elizabeth's published work in early childhood that shows the breadth and depth of her determination to have anti-bias principles and practices embedded practically into all aspects of work in early childhood education. All of these publications are available in the National Library of Australia.

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# In sickness and in death

Jill Huntley

My partner Elizabeth (Lib) had a stroke in mid-December 2014. Ten days later they told us that during routine scans for the stroke they had found secondary cancer in her lungs. They told us to work on getting to the rehabilitation centre and then focus on getting home. So for 11 weeks we did this and the work in the last 8 weeks was 7 hours/day, for six days/week. And we did get back to our new home and had a very happy 3 1/2 months here. Lib came home in a wheelchair with limited speech but maintained her beautiful smile and wonderful laugh. We were able to communicate in so many ways –with some words, our eyes, our touch, our hands, writing words and sentences down and the odd withering look!

Even during Lib's sickness people were starting to think about how they could get Lib into their place accommodating the wheelchair. St Benedict's Church which we attended also organised a place at the front where we could be together and have easier access to the altar. When we had haircuts our young hairdresser Stephanie (21) who we have known for ten years was really frustrated that they could not get Lib's wheelchair up to the basin to wash her hair. After Lib died Steph said they were looking for a new basin which would accommodate wheelchairs. They also helped me get Lib in the back door as there was too big a step at the front door. Other shopkeepers brought items out to the pavement for Lib to look at if we couldn't get into their shop. Our nursery had a pine log which they put down to form a ramp to assist me getting Lib in. Lib and I talked about a letter to council re not being able to enter some shops and the state of footpaths which just could not be used in a wheelchair. This letter has gone in with a full list of shops not able to be accessed and comments on the state of footpaths. Once when we visited the local Medical Centre, staff commented on our bright tops (Lib's was pink and mine was green). I said since we had to wheel about 1/3 out into the road (because of the steep camber on the side of the roads) this was our version of high visibility tops!

One of the most gut wrenching days I have had was the day I received Lib's death certificate. There was no mention of our twenty year partnership. When talking to the funeral director who was very helpful he told me that in South Australia no de facto relationship is listed on a death certificate even if it is a heterosexual relationship. Several of us contacted the Department for Births, Deaths and Marriages (the title should have given us a clue!) and received the same answer. After contacting some politicians we were redirected to the Attorney General and Deputy Premier, Hon. John Rau. His letter said "The Parliamentary Legislative Review Committee was currently conducting an enquiry into an amendment to the Regulations to enable de facto relationships to

be recognised on the register recording the death of a person (death certificate)". It also stated that "the South Australian Law Reform Institute is undertaking a review of South Australian laws and regulations that discriminate against people due to their sexuality or their sex and gender diversity". To this end several of us have made submissions which are on their committee website. This work has been requested by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in all states and territories.

In Home Care, ElderCare, supplied a care package to work with us to enable Lib to get home and to die at home. The Head Nurse told me that their team debriefed after Lib died and they talked about how good it was that they could facilitate Lib dying at home. They also debriefed with the doctors and the palliative care team from Community Health about how the team approach worked very well and facilitated our wishes.

Our experience with the three different hospitals and the Rehabilitation Unit was in general excellent. However as I read back through the journal I kept whilst Lib was in hospital and rehabilitation, I could see how at times I was terrified, in a "zombie" state, needing to ask questions but not always knowing who or indeed what to ask. I saw many people, older women in particular, who appeared in a worse state than me. The carer role is new to everyone and slightly daunting to say the least! So once I have rewritten my journal into fuller stories I intend to write a booklet with the help of Glenda and Patrick and family members who are nurses and two other lesbian friends who have offered their support.

Our experience highlighted the effects of not having marriage equality and the legality of making decisions for your partner. Please ensure you have all your paper work up to date such as wills, enduring power of attorney, advanced care directive, etc. As we were in the middle of selling our house it would have made everything very complicated without our documentation and it made all the medical decisions much easier. Without this paper work these process would have been much more difficult.

**So my Lib, you can see that in the midst of your sickness and after your death we are still working to get changes made for the betterment of gay and lesbian people and humanity in general.**

# Reflections: living & working with the anti-bias approach in memory and celebration of Elizabeth Dau

Glenda Mac Naughton (Ph.D)

Read at the celebration of Elizabeth's life, 31st July 2015, Canberra, ACT, Australia.

'Hallo'.

As Jill (Jill Huntley, Elizabeth's life partner) knows, this was one of Elizabeth's (Lib's) most used words in the last few conversations Lib and I had with each other. I remember Jill was delighted when Lib said 'Goodbye' to end what, unknown to Jill and I, would be my last conversation with Lib.

Despite that 'Goodbye', it is Lib's 'Hallo's' that I invite you to celebrate today.

'Hallo' is such an open and hopeful greeting. It invites response and says, 'Let's engage with each other'. That Lib held onto this so strongly in the last few months of her life I believe says much about how she lived her life and its core values.

My first 'Hallo' from Elizabeth was an invitation to contribute to the 1995 edition of *The Anti-Bias Approach in Early Childhood* edited by Elizabeth Dau and Barbara Creaser. Many 'Hallo's' followed in which she invited me to engage with her and others through publishing, professional development and conferences—about gender equity in early childhood, about how racism touched and tainted young children's lives, about the then unnamed pernicious effects of homophobia in the lives of children and their families and about children's rights more broadly. An 'Hallo' from Elizabeth was always inseparable from a smile so large and sparkling that resistance seemed futile. But, make no mistake; she was steely firm about the need to take action to stop discrimination and oppression wherever it was found. It was our job, she said often to me, to inspire others within our field of influence to do the same.

A very powerful and memorable of Elizabeth's 'Hallo's' I witnessed at a Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood (CEIEC) conference at the University of Melbourne in late 2000s.

I found her sat under the shade of some trees, in the courtyard near the CEIEC on a wooden bench saying 'Hallo' to a group of women (Anne Yaloot, April Jones, Lisa Smith and Rebecca Smith) from Bayulu Community via Fitzroy Crossing, Western Australia. They had travelled over 12 hours and several thousand kilometres to come and talk in English (for most the women their 3rd or 4th language) about the inter-relatedness between access to transport and the capacity of women in Indigenous communities in the West Kimberley to grow strong children. They talked about how they applied for a grant for a bus so that they could drive out on country and support children's

‘learning on country’. They talked about what ‘learning on country’ meant and how ‘learning on country’ is critical to safe and meaningful spaces for Indigenous children.

As always, Lib’s ‘Hallo’ was an invitation to engage served up with a generous portion of listening and learning for her. On that day, with the Bayulu women, at the CEIEC conference, her ‘Hallo’, as I had witnessed and experienced on so many other occasions, was founded on her seeking the wisdom of others in a way that only the wise can do. On that day, she listened for the wisdom of others to better know how to respond, act and engage with Australia’s first peoples to make a difference in their lives. She wanted to understand and act without assuming she knew what was best or what they needed. She wanted to hear from them what she needed to know and do to be respectfully engaged. She wanted to hear from them what she needed to know and do to change herself and those around her too.

With all that Elizabeth’s ‘Hallo’s’ gave and meant it is no surprise that she become a strong friend and supporter of the CEIEC. She not only attended every CEIEC conference, worked as voluntary Research Fellow and a contributor to CEIEC issue papers with topics as different as *‘Santa in early childhood centres’* to *‘Lesbian mums on ‘Playschool’*”, she also become a mentor to many students and practitioners associated with the CEIEC just starting on their journey to making a difference for equity and children’s rights in early childhood. As I know, that can be a tricky and unpopular path to follow in which others seek to dismiss and derail you. Lib always helped me to remember why it was necessary to never deviate from the path towards greater equity and rights for all.

CEIEC PhD students knew well that she had cleared a path for them and their work in a world that often denied and silenced how inequity shaped the lives of young children, their teachers, carers and families. Her Anti-Bias Curriculum (ABC) publications were an ‘Hallo’ for those CEIEC PhD students taking that journey seriously and trying to reshape the research that informed what was taken as the norm about how to think, act and feel as a child, family member, practitioner, researcher or policy maker in early childhood. Her ABC work was permission and an invitation to respond and engage with what it meant to take up issues of oppression, discrimination and inequity in early childhood. It was an ‘Hallo’ to be celebrated for all the pathways that have sprung from it and for the invitation it gave to so many to make a difference in the lives of others by seeing rights and respect as expectations about how to live and work in what was traditionally a very conservative field at the time.

As I mentioned earlier, Elizabeth’s (Lib’s) last word to me was ‘Goodbye’. But, as I also said earlier, it is Elizabeth’s ‘Hallo’s’ across the years that I invite you to celebrate today. For me, they were an invitation to engage with humility, respect and dignity to make a difference for children and their families, irrespective of their difference to what might be considered the ‘norm’. It is that invitation, I remember most vividly. It is that invitation that I want to celebrate today.

Lib's 'Hallo's' came, as I mentioned earlier, with a bewitching smile—they also came peppered with integrity and generosity. In celebrating Lib's life and her engagement in so many different ways, with all that the CEIEC stood for in the ten years of its existence, I invite you to keep her way of saying 'Hallo' alive. Inspire, invite and engage others you know to bring equity, fairness and generosity in early childhood and beyond to the centre stage of how they engage and live with young children, their families and each other. Inspire, invite and expect respect from others in early childhood and beyond by how you say 'Hallo' to them.

Keep Lib's 'Hallo' alive by remembering how it lived through her hope and belief we should and could all be better by treating each other respectfully. She was a woman whose capacity to live with and for others with integrity, wisdom and generosity made so many of us more able to be strong in making the world a better place. Personally, I shall deeply miss her and the times we can no longer have, but I celebrate her, for all that her 'Hallo' meant. Today, in celebrating her life I invite those of you who work for justice, equity and rights in and through early childhood and were touched by her words, her personal 'Hallo's' and her support for you in your work to celebrate Lib through keeping her 'Hallo' alive. I am so thankful Lib said 'Hallo' to me, to the CEIEC, to a better way to be and care in early childhood in Australia and to the world of early childhood beyond these shores. She so often gave me strength at times it was hard to believe making a difference was possible. I invite you in her memory to do the same for others in early childhood and beyond that you know and meet.

To the traditional owners on whose land we stand today in celebration of Lib – 'Hallo'. To each of you here today honouring and celebrating Lib, a very special woman – 'Hallo'. To Jill whose devotion, courage and strength through all that the last few months have brought her and whose wonderful and inspirational love for (Lib) Elizabeth can never be doubted – 'Hallo'. To Elizabeth (Lib), thank you and with love, respect and humility – 'Hallo'.

# Anti-bias in early childhood education

Sheralyn Campbell (Ph.D), University of Melbourne

Elizabeth Dau is one of many leaders whose writing has taken me to a ‘third space’ in which I can reimagine and reconstitute myself and my practices as an early childhood educator in a rural Australian early childhood service. This space is a dialogic encounter that pushes back at the silences, gaps, contradictions and unintended effects of my teaching.

For me, there is a long list filled with people whose work, ethics and spirit opened the borders to this space. Glenda MacNaughton, Bronwyn Davies, Erica Burman, Valerie Walkerdine, Chris Weedon, Patti Lather, Louise Derman-Sparks, Jennifer Gore, Jonathan Silin, Sally Lubeck, Patrick Hughes – the early list is long and these are just a few. Like these people, Elizabeth Dau invited me to think differently about what it means to work for social justice and to take an anti-bias approach to early childhood education (Dau, 1999).

At a time when neo-liberal discourses of education are strongly supported by our Australian early childhood National Quality Framework and embedded in our teaching practices I have been reflecting on how it is possible to lead with others for social justice in the early childhood field.

It takes me back to an episode in my teaching that has troubled me for some years.

## **The power of gender and ‘race’ in early childhood**

In 2000, Australian Prime Minister John Howard refused to walk with people across the Sydney Harbour Bridge for National Sorry Day because he believed that we cannot apologise for the actions of previous generations. In 2008, another Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, rose in Federal Parliament and uttered his Apology to the Stolen Generations. Despite Kevin Rudd’s apology, in 2008 John Howard continued to defend his reasons for not saying sorry (Howard, 2008).

I see how the politics of these two events unfolded in my classroom when around this time I found myself entangled by how forces of gender and ‘race’ played out for our group.

## The colour of mermaids<sup>1</sup>

Our service is located in a small rural seaside community that has been consistently listed as a 'post-code' for disadvantage for more than a decade (Vinson, Rawsthorne, Beavis & Ericson, 2015). Almost 25% of children attending our service are Koori, and more than 50% of our families are on the lowest Australian income scale.

Not long after our Australian Prime Minister's 2008 Apology, I worked part-time in the Preschool Room as an educator and had watched the slow emergence of a life-sized mermaid in our classroom. The Mermaid was the centre of a community project that had been planned by the children. I reflected in our Teacher's Journal: *"it's a lot of a work, but it also seems really important to children and families"*. Everyone got on board – everyone did something.

The Mermaid emerged over weeks. One week I returned to the classroom to find she had grown breasts. Other educators assured me that the children were driving this further gendering of her persona. At about this point the papier mache had begun to harden and the children began to plan the next stage of the project - painting her.

There was now no question the Mermaid was a 'she'. At the time of the project I chose not to question the sexualised beauty of the image chosen by the children because I believed their conversations and shared work on the project meant our group of diverse children were coming together in an important way. So I remained silent about the politics of our investments in this form of gendering even as my feminisms twinged.

I came in late one week to a conversation that Aaron, one of our Koori boys, was having with other children and an educator. The top of the Mermaid was still too wet to paint, but as we waited for the final layers to harden he suggested that our mermaid be an Aboriginal Mermaid. Others in the group agreed. Three Koori girls seemed particularly excited and talked animatedly about colour matching the Mermaid to their skin. They finally decided to paint her skin a coffee colour.

I was particularly pleased by this progression because it seemed like Aaron was layering one of the really important aspects of his identity onto a community project. The sea holds really strong meanings for our local Koori community and I saw this as evidence that Aaron was taking ownership of the project in a way that invited Indigenous families to be more involved. I believed that the Koori children had now claimed the project with their suggestion for the Mermaid's skin colour, even though we continued a very stereotypically sexist image of beauty.

This discussion between children also held additional significance for me as an educator because I had worried about Aaron for some time. There were times when he seemed a ball of anger – lashing out at the world, sitting at the edges of the group and, in my constitution of desirable boyhoods, out of step with how to successfully and peacefully enter into play with others. Hearing

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1 The names of individual people who were part of the Mermaid story are pseudonyms

Aaron suggest that our Mermaid could be Aboriginal made me feel excited about his trip from the margins to the centre of the group decision making - a centre often flooded with the trappings, desires and imaginings of our Whiteness.

I came in the next Thursday to a half painted pink mermaid:

I said to an educator: *"I thought we were having an Aboriginal mermaid. What happened?"*

The educator was working with the children and didn't raise her eyes. She continued to mix paint with children and responded saying: *"Nothing happened. They changed their minds"*.

Later she went on to elaborate about how they had held a group meeting and the children had voted on painting the Mermaid. They wanted to have a mermaid that looked like Ariel from the Disney movie *The Little Mermaid*. The democratic process underpinning the decision was captured on the picture story-board that the group had added to each week as they had documented their ideas and suggestions for the next phase of the project.

Aaron's name now sat at the top of the board under the question written by an educator *What colour will our Mermaid be?* Written clearly beside his name was: *White*.

Aaron's choice - now so different from our earlier conversation - sat alone and unsupported by anyone else. Below his name the eight girls in the group were listed. Each of them, including the four Koori girls, had chosen "pink" or "purple". The remaining names of the group of boys were scattered across a list of colours like red, blue, yellow. The largest number of 'votes' were for Pink. Through my eyes the story-board now documented how a democratic process had supported racisms and sexism that were constituted in our work. I was really disappointed. I wrote about this in our Teacher's Journal:

*The colour of the Mermaid's skin meant something to me in relation to what is happening for children in our group and how these things connect to the politics of 'race' in Australia. I'd like this to be the beginning of a conversation... What do you think?*

This entry was met with silence from the other educators, and then a week later I found an entry that seemed to shimmer with anger. The writer asked why I was *"taking over a happy community event and making it something else"*. The silence now had a different shape and form.

### **Entering the third space to trace lines of forces and lines of resistance**

*Silence can signal resistance as well as oppression, voice can create new moments for social control as well as personal efficacy. And words are notorious for concealing and transforming as well as revealing the truth of our lives. More than celebrating the unfettered production of talk, we might ask who is silent and what is unspoken in our classrooms (Silin, 1999, p 44).*

How is it possible for some things to be said and some things to remain silent? This question takes me to reflect again on the work of many mentors who like Elizabeth Dau have found ways to continue conversations about how our anti-bias work is entangled by social forces like gender, 'race', 'class' and ability - even when it is hard. This is not something required by the neo-liberal underpinnings of our Australian National Quality Framework (2012). So these conversations rely on the will of educators to reprioritise the politics of their work by focusing on the effects of how power operates.

Michel Foucault (1982) wrote about relations of power that are not simply oppressive but rather productive. In engaging the productive operation of power we can ask how lines of force can be traced in what is said and done in our classrooms. In tracing the lines of force we are then able to also look for lines of resistance.

I've come to think of this action as moving to a 'third space' where there are possibilities that lie in reconstructing the strategic 'actions upon the actions of others' (Foucault, 1982, p.220). For me this means looking for the effects of the how power operates in and through social forces like 'race' and gender and asking questions about advantage and disadvantage for those involved. Rather than seeking a singular 'Truth' this critical interrogation draws on different theoretical perspectives, or different people's experiences, or different ways of thinking and acting in order to blur existing boundaries and find new possibilities. These possibilities rely on a 'folding-in' of experiences and new subject positions as our own (Avalos & Winslade, 2010). The third space is then perhaps captured by the bell hooks image of a place *where borders can be crossed – cultural hybridity celebrated* (hooks, 1995, p.272). This time in this third space, I have drawn on ideas about the operation of power from Michel Foucault and Kylie Smith's use of Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's rhizoanalysis (e.g., Smith, 2013; Smith & Campbell, 2014).

The context of Australian race relations around the time of the Mermaid project demonstrates how the operation of power within a discourse of reconciliation produced significant positive effects in a long overdue National apology to the Stolen Generation and equally negative effects in John Howard's continued public refusal to apologise for past injustices. It is these two subject positions amongst others that also played out in our Mermaid project.

In working through some of these issues I have chosen to follow Kylie Smith's lead by tracing the lines of force that make it possible to map and overlay the effects of power but also to seek the lines of resistance from which we may reconstruct new possibilities.

## Tracing the lines of force and the lines of resistance

*There must exist a paradigm or practical model for social change that includes an understanding of ways to transform consciousness that are linked to efforts to transform structure (hooks, 1995, p.193).*

Was the Mermaid a 'happy community project' or was she a stereotype that continued sexist and heterosexist images of gender and colonial relations of 'race'? How are our shared consciousness and structures implicated in these lines of force and resistance?

### Lines of force

*The creation of a 'racialized' 'other' is at the heart of the possibility of racism (Hall, 1996). To racialize the 'other' one must racialize the 'self'. One must know how one differs from the 'other'. For white Australia, skin colour is how one knows oneself. The learning begins early. But for racism to flourish it is the desire for 'whiteness' and the fear and marginalisation of the 'other' – 'the non-white' - that makes skin colour matter (MacNaughton, 2005, pp.160-161).*

There were clearly lines of force later in the project as the Mermaid was defined by her pink skin and rounded breasts. These lines can be read in many other places that receive personal and institutional support and include children's books we use, research with children, relationships between children and adults and commodities that we value and use. They are captured in two parallel themes of one form of boyhood and girlhood in circulation.

Belonging and ownership are coloured White for boys:

Researcher: *Can you tell me about Australia? What it means to live in Australia?*  
James: *That you all have white skin* (MacNaughton, 2005, p.160).

A desirable beauty for girls is coloured White:

*Michelle, black and vivacious, pointed to a picture in a book I was reading to a small group and said "I wished I looked like her" the 'her' was a blond, pink cheeked girl (Paley, 1989, p.12).*

These two lines can be traced in the democratic group meeting where Aaron publicly declared his support for Whiteness. His public declaration was lured from him by the techniques of power that structured the group meeting and through which boyhoods/ girlhoods were regulated. These included group surveillance of Aaron, and the risks of exclusion and othering he faced with any other answer (Gore, 1998, 2002).

These lines of force and techniques of power equally traced powerful girlhoods in which the Koori girls were able to claim entry to a White girlhood using their knowledge of a desirable commodity,

*Ariel – The little mermaid*, by giving their public support to the most desirable colour for girls - pink or purple.

These lines of force remap dominant sexism and racism found throughout the project from the initial constitution of the Mermaid's she-beauty to the final choice of colour for the Mermaid's skin. Together we had invested in a feminised image of beauty that continued images of Whiteness and colonised and 'othered' Koori women.

There were many possibilities for engaging in political work throughout the project. Early in the project these included questioning the relationships between story-line heroes and heroines in *The Little Mermaid* or looking for other non-White Disney possibilities like Princess Tiana of Maldonia (Disney, 2009). Our silences acted like John Howard's refusal to apologise for the actions of previous generations -as a means of covering over the issues and reinstating the dominant stereotypes and relationships of White Australia. It was left to Aaron to show us different possibilities for political action.

### **Lines of resistance: Choosing an Aboriginal Mermaid**

*A song of hope  
Look up my people  
The dawn is breaking  
The world is waking  
    To a bright new day  
When none defame us  
No restriction tame us  
Nor colour shame us  
    Nor sneer dismay*

Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Kath Walker, 1992

The Mermaid story shows how lines of force can remap the political terrain of our classroom, but there were also lines of resistance from which a line of flight is possible. These lines of flight are found in Aaron's original choice of an Aboriginal Mermaid. In this act he is a visionary and activist working for reconciliation.

## Line of flight 1 - Visionary and Activist

*Mma Ramotse... considered it one of the very worst features of modern society that people should be ashamed to be of traditional build cultivating instead a look that was bony and positively uncomfortable. Everybody knows that we have a skeleton underneath our skins, there's no reason to show it (McCall-Smith, 2008, p.8)*

*I have two more dreams to realise: an Australian Aboriginal political party, and an Aboriginal Miss Australia (Collins, 1994, p.173)*

Aaron's offering of an Aboriginal Mermaid reshaped what constituted a desirable female persona for educators, Koori children and the whole group. As an activist and visionary this invitation to imagine beauty differently demonstrated his desire to take a line of flight towards resistance to the dominant images of Whiteness.

## Line of flight 2 - Reconciliation

*If we abandon the struggle to eliminate sexist defined notions of beauty altogether, we risk undermining all the marvellous feminist interventions which allowed us to embrace our bodies and ourselves and love them... we are not doing enough to eliminate those dangers – to create alternatives... until feminists go back to the beauty industry, go back to fashion, and create an ongoing, sustained revolution, we will not be free. We will not know how to love our bodies as ourselves (hooks, 2000, pp.35 - 36).*

Aaron's suggestion of an Aboriginal Mermaid extended to us a means of transforming our investments in our Whiteness and opened up the opportunity to colour the project Koori. Like Kevin Rudd's apology on behalf of the Nation and a Sorry Day walk across Sydney Harbor Bridge, Aaron mapped a road to reconciliation where we could meet half-way.

These lines of flight could take us to a different world where educators, children and the community are able to 'fold in' new subject positions (Avalos & Winslade, 2010).

## Folding in new subject positions from the third space

My reflections on the Mermaid take me back to my question about how we, like Aaron, sustain the political and activist work of change in early childhood education and use a third space to fold-in new subject positions for ourselves and others. How do we lead with others for social justice in early childhood? I have no answers or recipes, but rather thoughts about the mentors who have guided me and a story that comes from walking on the beach with my dogs.

Our beach walks end and begin at a series of rock pools. Our golden retriever stands on the edge of these rock pools - silent, alert with his tail just swaying from side to side. Our terrier runs around and around the pool barking furiously – he is never still.

They are both intent on looking for the small schools of tiny silver fish and larger more dangerous toad-fish that lie in the pools. The dogs see the silver flash of the sun on the school of fish, or the rush of movement by the bigger fish. From time to time this prompts them to plunge into the pool in the hope of catching a fish. It never happens. The fish either rush under the lip of the rocks and hide, or scatter until the dogs leave before returning to remap their regular path and rhythms as a school. However, every now and then when the dogs plunge in, the water washes over the top of the rocks and carries a fish out into the wider sea.

I think about the fish as the slippery politics of our classrooms. Occasionally we're alerted by a flash and we attempt to take hold of what is happening, interrogate it and change the effects for and between people. As educators we can be watchful, sound the alarm and/or plunge in to engage with what is happening. Often these issues just hide away for a while, or our 'actions upon their actions' operate to make it possible for these issues to return, repeat and remap what has been happening. However, every now and then our political action results in a surge that offers a disruption, a line of flight that can reconstitute our meanings, relationships and possibilities.

The response from my colleagues to my concerns about the Mermaid was one such moment where neither barking at fish nor plunging into the pool created change. Instead we remapped the existing relations of power, and the dominant images of Whiteness and beauty. But in thinking about Elizabeth Dau and others who continue to lead the political work of early childhood I have found myself rewriting this story in a third space. I am seeking a line of flight from my Whiteness to acknowledge Aaron, not as 'troubled' but as activist, visionary and champion for reconciliation. Can I hold onto this slippery fish for the next time I am part of learning with children? Can I live up to the words of Sue Lopez-Atkinson in my work?

*Self-determination ... means that Indigenous people have the right to establish culturally appropriate and empowering early childhood education and care for our children and in spite of dispossession, we have a vision for our children built on our cultural strengths* (Lopez-Atkinson, 2014,n.p.).

How can I be part of that vision? What can I do? These are some of my questions. What will you do?

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# And the Princesses married and lived happily ever after: Challenging compulsory heterosexuality in the early childhood classroom

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In July 2004, Elizabeth Dau with Patrick Hughes, Glenda MacNaughton and Margaret Coady wrote a Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood (CEIEC) Equity Issues Paper called *Lesbian mothers on 'Playschool' – what's the fuss?* This paper was in response to media, government and public backlash related to two mums appearing on an episode of the Australian's children's television show Playschool. Concerns for the corruption of the 'innocent' child were a prevalent theme in discussion about the 'appropriateness' of representing a lesbian couple on national television.

In reflecting with Glenda about the influence Elizabeth's work had on me – her writing (Dau, 2001; 1999) helped me to critically reflect on my pedagogical practices, specifically:

- how I paid attention to the storylines being played out in the classroom. Who was always the princess? Who was always the prince? Who had to be the dog or the crocodile? Who got 'caught' and put in jail? And what this all meant for how children and adults took up and performed identities that were authorised and how unauthorised identities were silent by others or ourselves.
- what I observed and documented.
- what topics and ideas I would discuss with families.

Elizabeth's work has always and will continue to remind me of the importance of being politically active within and outside of the classroom. Elizabeth was always quick to respond to public discourse that was unfair and discriminating. It is with this in mind that I discuss the early childhood space as a site where discourses of compulsory heterosexuality continue to play out. Australia is still one of the few minority world countries where same sex marriage is not legalised. Homophobic debates within the media about the 'natural' and 'normal' state of marriage in that it is between a man and a woman continue to dominate. The argument that marriage is for the establishment of a family and the production of children and the fear for children's 'innocence' where they are part of a same-sex couple continue. Former Prime Minister Julia Gillard voted against a bill for marriage equality in 2012. She commented during 2010 that she choose not to get married completely dismissing the point that as a heterosexual women she at least had the choice unlike same-sex couples (Croome, 2010). This whole debate raised the question of how within the early childhood field can we push back against compulsory heterosexual discourses?

## Inclusive approach to gendered and sexual identities

Marriage and families are acted out within the early childhood classroom regularly. In a three to five year old classroom in a long day care centre four children whispered a conversation about marriage at the drawing table while tracing pictures of what the children identified as a 'wedding' ring:

*Malcolm: Isabel what Isabel?*

Zane whispers in Nell's ear. Malcolm moves beside Zane to listen.

*Malcolm: What did you say?*

*Zane: Nothing.*

*Malcolm: I heard you say something.*

*Zane: Nothing.*

*Isabel: You said.*

*Malcolm: You're not allowed to tell secrets.*

*Isabel: You said...I know you said something about me.*

*Malcolm: I know Zane said secrets.*

*Isabel: Tell it to me.*

*Zane: No secret is not tell people.*

*Isabel: Well.*

*Malcolm: Then I'm going to tell on you then.*

*Isabel: Well if there's a secret then you can't tell cause Zane you can't...because you're not allowed to tell secrets because that's not fair for other children.*

*Malcolm: Yeah but.*

Malcolm leans over to Isabel and whispers in her ear and then Isabel and Malcolm smile at Zane and Nell.

*Zane: I*

*Nell: I'm going to marry Zane.*

[The picture of the diamond ring is open in front of the children].

*Isabel: I'm going to marry Malcolm.*

*Malcolm: Yeah it's a secret!*

*Isabel: It's all of a secret isn't it Zane?*

Zane nods his head yes.

Zane, Malcolm, Nell and Isabel use language and artifacts such as a colouring book and the pictures of a ring and flowers to perform compulsory heterosexuality (Butler, 1990). Nell stated that she was marrying Zane and Isabel announces her intention to marry Malcolm. For me this raised questions about how children construct and perform sexualised identities. This event also raises questions around the intersections of sexuality and ethnicity. Nell is Asian and proposed marriage to Zane who is also Asian. Isabel is a white Anglo-Australian/New Zealander who has proposed marriage to Malcolm who is also a white Anglo-Australian. Did Nell choose Zane for marriage through the identification of a discourse that marks white Anglo-Australians as superior and therefore out of bounds for a relationship? If Nell chose Malcolm would that act be seen as resistance to racist domination? Further, in the text Malcolm and Zane seem to accept the statements from Nell and Isabel in relation to marriage. How would Malcolm have reacted if Nell had stated that she was

going to marry him? What might Isabel have said if Zane had stated that he was going to marry her? This conversation marked the male/female dualism in which the boy marries the girl. What would happen if Zane decided that he wanted to marry Malcolm or Isabel chose to marry Nell?

## The innocent child

With over 30 years of research on gender and sexuality identity formation in the early childhood space we know that children by the age of three years have clear ideas about the 'correct' role that boys and girls should and can take up, what is 'normal' or 'right' ways to perform girlhood and boyhood and what it means to transgress this. (MacNaughton, 2000; Blaise, 2005; Davies, 2003). Surely, based on this research informed evidence it is imperative that we draw on anti-bias principles in the classroom to challenge stereotypical beliefs about being 'male' and 'female' and teach children about what is fair and unfair about how children include and exclude each other based on gender and sexuality related to themselves and their family.

For some educators their construction of childhood limits their ability to see outside the perception of the young child as innocent and in need of protection from the evil, adult world. This perception can be traced back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's writing about nature and the child. Taylor (2013) wrote:

*Rousseau staunchly believed that children are born into an originary natural state of essential goodness, but both their affiliation with Nature and the natural goodness and innocence associated with it are threatened by the corrupting influences of society, or what he scathingly referred to as the degenerative 'hands of man' (p.3).*

Because of this some educators continue to believe that children are too young and innocent to understand that they are speaking and acting in sexist or homophobic ways. In fact, many would argue that the child is not being sexist or homophobic because they do not understand what the words mean and the effects of the words. To raise issues of sexism and homophobia would be to corrupt the child with ideas that they do not understand.

Elizabeth's work and other anti-bias writers would argue that children notice differences early on and that as children navigate their worlds they are influenced by society's biases. The goal of anti-bias work is:

1. To free children from constraining, stereotypical definitions of gender roles so that no aspect of development will be closed off simply because of a child's sex.
2. To foster children's healthy gender identity by enabling them to gain clarity about the relationship between biological identity and gender roles.
3. To promote equity of development for both sexes [and I would argue that this needs to shift to include all sexes including transsexual people and push back against the notion that there are two sexes – male or female] by facilitating each child's participation in activities necessary for physical, cognitive, emotional and social growth.

4. To develop children's skills for challenging sexist stereotypes and behaviours (Derman-Sparks & the A.B.C. Task Force, 1989, p.49).

What does this mean in the everyday classroom? For many early childhood classrooms resources that represent diverse families are available including posters, puzzles and storybooks. How many teachers use these resources as artifacts to display and how many use them as political tools to talk with children and open up conversations? How might we use conversations about families with two mums or two dads to discuss marriage equality? To do this do we need to challenge the notion that we are all the 'same' and 'equal' even if we are different? Not all families are the same and not all families are treated equally. Families where there is a mum and a dad can choose to get married but where a family has two mums or two dads they are not allowed to get married in Australia.

Where there are same-sex partners represented in the children's picture story books, they often show imagery of the happy family but do not raise questions about whether this couple have marriage equality rights. Interestingly, in popular culture for young children, movies and television programs regularly portray princesses and princes as heterosexual - the prince and princess marry and live happily ever after. How might we create stories with children where two princesses or two princes fall in love, get married and live happily ever after?

### **Gender and sexuality as a fluid and shifting performance in the everyday classroom**

As I am writing I am also reflecting on how many early childhood resources represent gender and sexuality as fixed rather than fluid and changing. What are the implications of this for children living within transgendered spaces performing their own identity in shifting ways or being part of family or friend's lives who are doing so. Conversations about what this means do not have to be confronting or radical. For example:

One lunch time sitting at a table with a group of six children one of the girls said to the group when I grow up I am going to be a boy. The other five children laughed at the child and one child said "That's silly. You're a girl, you can't be a boy" and the children laughed again. As the child hung her head in what I thought was shame I said to the group "Actually, if Lydia wants to be a boy when she grows up she can. It might not be easy but she can and people like doctors can help her". Lydia looked at me and smiled and the rest of the group nodded their head in agreement. The conversation about the spaghetti that they were eating for lunch dominated the discussion for the rest of lunch.

How do we think about 'teachable' moments where we push back on dominant discourses and speak a different alternative truth to open up possibilities for children to imagine different futures that represent their identity performances?

Another example of planning for equity conversations was when I read *10000 Dresses* a picture book by Marcus Ewert (2008) to a group of three to five year olds. The book tells a story about Bailey who dreams about dresses and flowers, and illustrations throughout the book show Bailey wearing wonderful dresses in a variety of shapes, designs and colours. He wears a different dress

everyday. The boys in the group resisted the storyline and performed hegemonic masculinity through a variety of strategies:

- Laying back on the carpet so they couldn't see the picture book.
- Turned their back and started playing with cars.
- Yelling out that they didn't like the story and wanted another book.
- Getting up and going to the toilet.

Each of these performances worked to try to stop narratives that the boys did not see as 'normal' or 'natural'. They resisted any dialogue about the book and did not pick up the book to read while it was on the book shelf. It highlighted for me the need to do more than put resources out in the classroom that represent diverse families and diverse gender and sexual identities.

## Conclusion

As a teacher working to achieve anti-bias goals I have to take risks and speak and act my politics in and outside of the classroom. So I will start to develop stories and dramatic play opportunities for children where the two princes and two princesses or the two mum and two dads meet, fall in love, get married and live happy ever after. I will not wait for our government to legislate for marriage equality (but demand it of them) and I will not wait for media corporations to develop marriage equality stories on the big screen or in picture books (about humans rather than animals).

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# Learning Indigenous languages

Sue Atkinson, Elizabeth Dau, Karina Davis, Glenda Mac Naughton  
(This paper was originally published in 2004 as a CEIEC Members' Briefing Paper, No. 3.1)

## A challenge

Richard Frankland - Indigenous playwright, author and performer - gave the opening keynote of the CEIEC annual conference in November 2003 in Melbourne (Australia). He posed this challenge to the audience:

*All Australian children attending early childhood services should know how to say hello and goodbye in their local Indigenous language(s).*

Why should early childhood communities do this? What can we gain by doing it?

### Richard Frankland:

“Australia has many different nations, but we have taught a nursery version of our country’s history. As a result, we have people ‘who cannot grasp or deal with contemporary issues’ (Inga Clindennen, “True Stories”).”

“By teaching the local language, greetings, or other similar phrases, we sow a seed of knowledge and identity. We express our pride about where we were born, where we grew up and, consequently, who we are as individuals, communities and as a nation.”

“Additionally, we give or create a platform for a healing process that can only be begun by us as contemporary adults and finished by the children of future generations. We cannot heal a two hundred and fifteen year wound overnight. We are, in effect, recognising the past for what it truly is and planting seeds here in the present for future generations to use.”

“In my opinion we make the individual stronger by contributing to identity; we pay respect to traditional owners of the land; we promote growth in the local Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities and we sow the seeds of a true national identity.”

The CEIEC has responded to Richard's challenge by:

- Inviting people at the 2003 conference to share greetings and farewells in the Indigenous languages they know with the rest of the conference. (See **Some Indigenous Greetings**, below.)
- Developing this *Members' Briefing* to pose Richard's challenge to a larger group of early childhood professionals and to encourage us all to think about the issues. (See **Thinking about the issues**, below.)
- Including in this Members' Briefing some resources that people can use to learn about their local Indigenous languages. (See **Learning about Indigenous languages and Resource/advisory Agencies** below.)

## Some Indigenous greetings

Here are the greetings that participants in the 2003 CEIEC conference shared with others. Before you begin to teach these to children, remember:

***Indigenous communities sometimes have rules governing who can and should teach children specific words or languages. Consequently, ask the permission of your local Indigenous community/ies before you teach children their language/s.***

- *Jandai* (Noonuccal people, Queensland)  
"Yura" ("I see you." or "We are here together.")
- *Walmatjarri* (Kimberly, West Australia)  
"Woolyoo Ngun?" ("Are you OK?")  
"Wuliwoo" ("Goodbye")
- *Kurna* (Adelaide Plains, South Australia)  
"Ninna Marnie" ("Hello" or "How are you?" or "Are you good/well?")  
"Nukkuta" ("Goodbye")
- *Aboriginal English* (South Australia)  
"Nunkun ya later" ("See you later")
- *Pitjantjatjara* (Central Desert)  
"Wai, palta" ("Hi, how're you going?")
- *Broome Kriol* (Kimberly, West Australia)  
Right hand facing, thumb and first two fingers extended, then twist the hand ("What now?")

## Thinking about the issues

Why should early childhood staff – and the children in their care - learn about the issues surrounding Indigenous languages? Here are some resources to help you to answer this question.

- *The Lonely Planet Australian Phrasebook*.  
Devotes 100 pages to "Aboriginal languages".
- *Racism No Way: Diversity of Language*.

Lots of resources including current language groups and the percentage of languages spoken. Many links to other sites concerned with racism.

- [www.racismnoway.com.au](http://www.racismnoway.com.au)
- [www.indignet.com.au](http://www.indignet.com.au)
- *Many nations, one people*

Text-based discussion.

[www.abc.net.au/schoolstv.nations.ep5](http://www.abc.net.au/schoolstv.nations.ep5)

- *Australian Social Trends 1999*. Australian Bureau of Statistics. (Population > Population composition > Indigenous languages.)

[www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au)

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[www.deh.gov.au/soe/techpapers/languages/pubs/indigenous-languages](http://www.deh.gov.au/soe/techpapers/languages/pubs/indigenous-languages)

## Learning about Indigenous languages

Your local Indigenous communities can help you to learn about their language/s, but don't expect them to take responsibility for your learning. Do some initial research for yourself, as this demonstrates your willingness to inform *yourself* about the issues, rather than relying on others to do it for you. For example:

1. Try to find other non-Indigenous early childhood professionals who know the local Indigenous language/s and ask them to share what they know.
2. Do some research using (e.g.) the resources in this paper.
3. Contact the local Indigenous or Aboriginal Education agency for advice. These agencies are generally located in the Commonwealth's Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) or in your local State Department of Education. (See your local phone book.)

Once you've done some initial work, you can ask your local Indigenous communities for advice on where to go next.

## Who are the traditional owners of your land?

Start by asking your local council, because in the spirit of Reconciliation many local councils actively acknowledge the traditional owners of the land. Ensure that you know how to spell and pronounce the traditional owners' name correctly.

## What are the Indigenous languages of your region?

Here are two online sites with which to begin to answer this question.

- *Aboriginal Languages of Australia: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages*. You can search this by language and by state.

[www.dnathan.com](http://www.dnathan.com)

- *ASEDA (Australian Studies Electronic Data Archive)*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. You can search this map of languages by region.  
[www.combs.anu.edu.au/SpecialProj/ASEDA](http://www.combs.anu.edu.au/SpecialProj/ASEDA)

## How do some common English phrases translate into local Indigenous languages?

Learn Indigenous English words that are appropriate to your local area. See, e.g., *The Lonely Planet Australian Phrasebook*.

## Resource/Advisory Agencies

- Dhgun-Gur Resource Unit, Creche and Kindergarten Association, Queensland  
[www.candk.asn.au](http://www.candk.asn.au) Tel.: (04) 9239 488
- Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. GPO Box 4532QQ. Melbourne Vic 3000  
Tel.: (03) 96506371 Fax: (03) 9650 6409
- Secretariat of the National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), 171 Smith St, Fitzroy, Victoria, 3065  
Tel: (03) 9417 6744 Fax: (03) 9419 9793
- Aboriginal Early Childhood Services Support Unit, 37 Cavendish Street, Stanmore, NSW, 2048.
- Aboriginal Education Reference Library, South Australia. Tel: (08) 8343 6538  
<http://webdb.central.sa.edu.au/aerl.htm>

## Other resources

- Yarra Healing. Has information on the Kulin nation and other groups in the Melbourne area.  
[www.yarrahealing.melb.catholic.edu.au/home](http://www.yarrahealing.melb.catholic.edu.au/home)

As this paper was originally published in 2004 some of the website links are now broken. If you would like to find out more about Indigenous language you may wish to visit the following:

- [www.vaclang.org.au](http://www.vaclang.org.au)
- [www.ourlanguages.net.au](http://www.ourlanguages.net.au)
- [www.firstlanguages.org.au](http://www.firstlanguages.org.au)
- [www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/language/#axzz3tDZG3K1h](http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/language/#axzz3tDZG3K1h)

# Lesbian mothers on 'Playschool' – what's the fuss?

Contributors to this CEIEC issues paper are Elizabeth Dau, Patrick Hughes, Glenda Mac Naughton & Margaret Coady

(This paper was originally published in 2004 as a CEIEC Equity Issues Paper)

In early June, the ABC's Playschool program featured a scene in which Vicki Harding appeared with her daughter, Brenna, and her partner Jackie Braw. This scene in which a child with two mums appeared on Playschool has created considerable media response and government and wider public comment. Playschool was chastised for being an 'unlikely collaborator in the assault on childhood innocence' (Letters to the Herald Sun – 6.6.04) and the Federal government expressed concern at the exposure of young children to the idea of same-sex parenting (Peterson, Sydney Morning Herald – 5.6.04). Playschool was also congratulated for reflecting the diversity of family life in Australia (Peterson, Sydney Morning Herald – 5.6.04).

*What issues do early childhood staff face in deciding whether to take an inclusive approach to family diversity?*

## **Issue 1: young children meet lesbian and gay people in their lives**

Young children are likely to meet lesbian and gay people among their parents, early childhood staff, family and friends. It is generally believed that ten per cent of the population identifies itself as 'non-heterosexual' and so some young children will grow up to identify themselves as gay or lesbian.

### Some questions facing early childhood communities:

- Should we ignore the reality of many young children's lives by ignoring the fact that they will know and meet lesbian and gay family members and friends?
- Should we ignore nearly 10% of the population in the materials we offer to young children about family life?

## **Issue 2: for some young children lesbian and gay families are their normality**

Sexuality is a complex topic that can sometimes be a sensitive and contentious topic among adults, as the current concern about "Playschool" demonstrates. Many parents and early childhood staff believe that young children are innocents, who can't understand the complexities of sexual matters. For these adults, sexuality has no place in a young child's life - whether in an early childhood centre, in the media or elsewhere - and so they seek to prevent young children from encountering what they regard as expressions of sexuality.

That clear – and clear-cut – view of children and sexuality becomes complicated and contradictory in practice, as the current “Playschool” controversy illustrates. Critics of ‘that episode’ claim that by including a child referring to her ‘two mummies’, the program implied that families based on and around homosexual relationships are normal – just like families based on heterosexual relationships. The critics seem to believe that “Playschool” might lead young children to regard one’s sexuality as a ‘lifestyle choice’ between equally attractive choices, while for the critics heterosexuality is the only valid choice, because it is normal and anything else is abnormal or deviant. In short: under the guise of protecting ‘innocents’ from sexuality, these critics actively encourage children to be heterosexist (to see heterosexuality as right and every other sexuality as wrong) and to be homophobic (fearful or hateful of ‘non-heterosexual’ people).

Some questions facing early childhood communities:

- Should we stop children who live in lesbian and gay families from talking about their families?
- What does it mean for children who live in lesbian and gay families to have their family lives considered abnormal?
- What ethical responsibility do we have to all children to respect their family lives in all their diversity?

### **Issue 3: Lesbian and gay families face discrimination**

Gays and lesbians face personal and social discrimination, including verbal and physical stereotyping, harassment and abuse; and, legal discrimination in areas such as property rights, inheritance rights and rights associated with being a (heterosexual) spouse and/or parent. Young children need to know that some people face such discrimination and that they are likely to meet such people in their everyday life. From this perspective, “Playschool” didn’t go far enough! Its one fleeting and casual reference to lesbian mothers as if heterosexism and homophobia don’t exist misleads young children into believing that sexuality is simply a matter of personal choice.

Early childhood staff who might otherwise wish to challenge heterosexism and homophobia in their service– as they challenge other forms of discrimination – can be wary of addressing the issue, especially where none of the parents or staff identify as homosexual. However, children can benefit from living in an anti-heterosexist environment, irrespective of whether any particular adults around them identify as gay or lesbian, just as they can benefit from an environment that actively challenges racism and sexism. They can broaden their understanding of the diversity of human relationships and strengthen their commitment to equity and fairness.

Some questions facing early childhood communities:

- Should we encourage children to challenge all forms of discrimination?
- What limits should we place on what children learn about diversity?

## Responding respectfully to the issues

A respectful response to the questions about lesbian and gay families in early childhood services starts by respecting the diverse ways in which families live their lives. In practice, this means finding ways to create an environment in children's services where all children feel that their families are respected and where all children can learn to respect diversity. Some simple ways to do this follow:

- Offer children stories and games (and television programs!) of people in various forms of relationships, including different sorts of families
- Include pictures of notable lesbians and gay men among the images around the service or centre
- Use open-ended and gender-neutral play materials
- Arrange play materials in particular spaces (e.g. home corner, block corner) in different ways and encourage children to play differently with them
- Challenge children's and adults' discriminatory behaviour.

It's also important that all adults feel respected in a service. Some simple ways to do this follow:

- Don't assume that someone (child or adult) is or will be of a particular sexuality
- Make a particular point of discussing the program with parents or staff who identify as gay or lesbian
- Where and when appropriate, discuss diversity, difference and discrimination with children and adults (perhaps use Diversity Dolls to encourage this discussion)
- Use inclusive spoken and written language (e.g. "parent" or "carer" rather than "mother" and "father"; "dominant" or "widespread" rather than "normal") wherever possible
- Include in your publicity, etc. images of people in relationships other than heterosexual nuclear families
- Challenge children's and adults' discriminatory language.

## Inspirational quotes to engage your local early childhood community in discussion and debate about the issues in this paper.

The most certain test by which we judge whether a country is really free is the amount of security enjoyed by minorities.

John (Lord) Dalberg-Acton (English historian and theologian, 1834-1902)

No government has the right to tell its citizens when or whom to love. The only queer people are those who don't love anybody.

Rita Mae Brown (U.S. novelist, 1944- )

As professionals who work with families, our willingness to talk openly about identity and to help foster a positive sense of self in children can make an enormous difference in affirming the rich diversity of our human community and helping children make bridges across cultures and traditions. ...The more that children have a solid grounding and understanding about who they are and where they came from, the more they learn to move with grace and confidence among communities different from their own, and

the closer we get to building a world of respect, curiosity, sharing, and humanity.

(Adapted from *A Place to Begin: Working With Parents on Issues of Diversity*, by Dora Pulido-Tobiassen and Janet Gonzalez-Mena, reprinted by California Tomorrow.)

Our mission is to foster the growth of daughters and sons of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender parents of all racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds by providing education, support and community on local and international levels, to advocate for our rights and those of our families, and to promote acceptance and awareness in society that love makes a family.

(Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere [COLAGE])

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## Resources, references and further reading

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Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE) is the only national and international organization in the world specifically supporting young people with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender parents. A helpful website with resources and good links: <http://www.colage.org>

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# Santa in early childhood services – what’s the fuss?

Contributors to this CEIEC issues paper are Elizabeth Dau, Patrick Hughes, Glenda Mac Naughton, Diana Hetherich & Judy Baird  
(This paper was originally published in 2002 as a CEIEC Equity Issues Paper)

A Brisbane early childhood centre received an anonymous death threat on 3 December 2002. On that day, “The Australian” had reported that the centre has excluded Santa Claus from its Christmas celebrations for the past two years, as part of its policy of making people from every culture feel equally at home at the centre. “The Australian” report accompanied reports by newspapers in Victoria that several early childhood centres in that state had ‘banned Santa Claus’.

*What issues do early childhood staff face in deciding whether to involve Santa in their end of year celebrations?*

## **Issue 1: Santa can be culturally exclusive**

Many early childhood educators have argued for some time that an early childhood centre that celebrates only Christmas denies its children the opportunity to learn about the full range of Australia’s cultures. Concentrating on celebrations in one culture – whatever it is – at the expense of all the others stops us understanding and respecting other cultures and it invites intolerance and discrimination.

Australia is a society with many cultures, races, and religions and its rich tradition of tolerance and fairness has grown as its diversity has grown. In some early childhood centres, staff and parents have tried to continue that tradition of fairness by avoiding celebrations specific to one culture that could potential exclude people from other cultures. Christmas is one such celebration. “The committee and staff felt it was not appropriate to have Santa for equity and cultural and religious reasons and chose to instead to have a performer come and part with the children for the end of the year. We, too, received hate mail and death threats”. An early childhood teacher.

Some questions facing early childhood communities:

- Should we avoid all celebrations that are culturally and/or religiously specific?
- Should we include diverse cultural and religious celebrations in our centres throughout the year, including at Christmas time?

## **Issue 2: Santa can promote the commercialization of Christmas**

In a society where Christmas is the peak period of commercial activity, Christmas and Santa have become associated with commercialism, acquisitiveness and competitiveness. This can be difficult

for families living in poverty. Many charities support a growing number of people for whom a 'traditional' Christmas is increasingly beyond their means and for whom "If you're good, Santa brings you what you want" is a burden, not a promise.

I have thought for a long time that the materialism of Christmas has become the predominant theme of Christmas in Australia. When I was teaching, I encouraged the children to think more of giving than receiving at this time of the year, eg. making gifts for family and local elderly people. A Victorian Children's Services Development Officer.

#### Some questions facing early childhood communities:

- Should we promote the commercial aspect of Christmas?
- Should we promote the religious nature of Christmas?
- Should we actively promote giving rather receiving as the spirit of Christmas?

### **Issue 3: Santa can counter 'Stranger Danger' programs**

Child safety and protection programs tells children not to talk to strangers. Yet at Christmas, many children are encouraged to talk to a man in a red suit and with a white beard whom they have not met before and whom some children find frightening and distressing.

#### Some questions facing early childhood communities:

- Should we encourage children to talk to this particular stranger?
- Should we invite Santa in when we know many young children cry or feel fearful or anxious about him?

### **Responding respectfully to the issues**

A respectful response to the questions about Santa in early childhood services starts by respecting the diverse ways in which families understand Christmas and its role in their lives. In practice, this can mean, for example:

- avoiding Christmas altogether
- concentrating on the religious and ceremonial aspects of Christmas
- emphasizing the giving of gifts rather than the receiving of gifts
- leaving families to decide about Santa. If families take their children to meet Santa, rather than Santa visiting the centre, no child will feel excluded from Santa's visit because they have a different culture with different celebrations. If families want their children to meet Santa, he's in most shopping centres for weeks before Christmas. Leaving families to decide means that they can choose whether they want their children to talk to a strange man whose appearance often frightens them! This doesn't condemn poor Santa, it just reminds us that meeting Santa counters the message "Don't talk to strangers" and isn't always the happy time we want it to be.

- Inviting families to share their end of year rituals and celebrations with each other. For example:

We are having an end of year concert which relates to the program, “The Rhythm of Life: Rituals, traditions and celebrations”. We are collecting data on all kinds of rituals and celebrations from families, which we then discuss in a large group, and display. As most of our children do celebrate Christmas and more than half are Catholic, we even have a Nativity on the Interest Table this week, along with other displays of how other cultures celebrate Christmas, and what the meanings of Christmas may be. A Victorian early childhood worker.

## **Respectful resolution of the issues: some principles**

### *With the parents*

- Clarify your own ideas on Christmas, on Santa’s role in Christmas and the issues it raises – why would you celebrate Christmas with young children, what could they learn, and who would gain from it?
- Talk with colleagues about how they manage Christmas celebrations and Santa’s role – ask colleagues how they came to their decisions.
- Reflect on ways to make Christmas meaningful to young children – if you believe that it’s important to celebrate Christmas in an early childhood setting what is the most meaningful ways to do so?
- Before Christmas, discuss with families how you will approach Christmas and Santa – ask families if they celebrate Christmas at home and if they believe it should be celebrated in your service?
- Reflect on the effects of including Santa in your celebration for each child and family in your group – ask yourself how included or excluded will specific families and children feel? Who will benefit most?
- Decide the most respectful and inclusive way to handle celebrations in your service at this time of year and other times of the year.

### *With the children – if Christmas is to be celebrated in your service*

- Encourage children to share with each other their ideas and feelings about the different ways they celebrate this time of the year
- Ensure that each child has accurate information about Christmas
- Honor each child’s family celebrations (or lack of them) by talking with children about the different ways that people understand Christmas
- Emphasise the values behind the celebration, not its commercial aspects
- Avoid stereotyping in your celebrations, including gender-stereotyped roles and gifts for children and families.

Each centre's attitude to Christmas should reflect the views of its staff, its parents and its children. A high-quality centre adapts to the changing needs and wishes of its specific staff, parents and children. Requiring it to celebrate any particular festival or event prevents it from doing so.

### **As aside about Christmas and its origins: for reflection**

(Some) of the Christmas customs that we observe today have their roots in pagan ceremonies that developed long before the birth of Christ. Both the midwinter festival of Yule in northern Europe and the Saturnalian midwinter holidays in southern Europe contained elements which have connotations with the modern Christmas. For example, Saturnalian celebrations which noted the passing of the old year and paid homage to the new Year included much feasting and drinking, as well as the exchange of presents. ... In addition ritual fires and the use of evergreens were important factors in the ceremonies which were partly designed to placate the gods and ensure the return of the waning sun (Golby, 1981, p.13).

In England,...legislation was passed in 1647 (during the Puritan revolution) stating that all festivals and holidays which had 'superstitious; connotations should not be observed. This, of course, included Christmas (Golby, 1981, p.14).

The Restoration in 1660 ensured that the laws against Christmas were relaxed. But Christmas did not return to becoming the popular festival that it had been in the previous century... Christmas became one of many holidays, rather than an exceptional event (Golby, 1981, p.16).

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### **Resources, references and further reading**

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