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ABSTRACT

Noting that portrayals of early childhood settings as communities of care distinguish them from other education contexts, this paper presents a counter-narrative that focuses on workplace tensions experienced by an Australian preschool teacher. The counter-narrative was informed by informal interviews held 4 times yearly over a period of 7 years following graduation from an early childhood teacher education program and focused on her new position as a teacher of 3- to 4-year-olds in a community-managed preschool. The paper draws on Soerst and Bryant's conceptualization of violence as omission, repression, and alienation to deconstruct the counter-narrative and thereby identify a range of forces (individual, organization, structural-cultural) that may contribute to workplace violence in early childhood settings. The underlying assumption of the paper is that early childhood practitioners need to problematize prevailing noncritical constructions of early childhood settings as exemplifying communities of care if the field is to work more effectively toward realizing this ideal. (Contains 31 references.) (KB)

Workplace Violence in Early Childhood Settings: A Counter Narrative

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Abstract

I begin this article with a counter-narrative that focuses on the workplace tensions experienced by an Australian preschool teacher. Drawing on Soerst and Bryant's (1995) conceptualisation of violence, I then deconstruct the counter-narrative to identify a range of forces (individual, organisational, structural-cultural) that may contribute to workplace violence in early childhood settings. My underlying assumption is that we need to problematise prevailing non-critical constructions of early childhood settings as exemplifying communities of care if we are to work more effectively toward realising this ideal.

Introduction

Portrayals of early childhood settings as communities of care — and claims that this ethic of care (Noddings, 1984) distinguishes early childhood settings from other education contexts — abound in the early childhood literature (see, for example, Goldstein, 1997; MacNaughton & Newman, 1999; Rodd, 1998; Woodrow & Fasoli, 1998). Early childhood settings, many assert, embody qualities such as collaboration, compassion, intimacy and trust. In this article, I argue that such constructions can sanitise and overly simplify the emotional landscapes of these settings.

My intention is two-fold. First, I want to encourage a critical consideration of the ecologies of early childhood settings. Second, I want to explore the potential of Van Soerst and Bryant's (1995) conceptualisation of violence for furthering our understanding of these ecologies. Consequently, I have adopted a two-part structure. I begin with a counter-narrative that seems, to me, to represent a cry from the shadows of an early childhood community. Like all counter-narratives, it seeks to problematise and challenge previously taken-for granted constructions and understandings (Neilsen, 1999). I then use Van Soerst and Bryant's (1995) notion of violence to deconstruct the counter-narrative and to consider the potential insights it offers into aspects of the dynamics of early childhood workplaces.

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Theoretical Perspective

In this article I use narrative methodology within a critical research perspective. This decision reflects my belief that narrative is "the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.1) and that "we hear and understand in narratives" (Gudmundsdottir, 1996, p.291). It also reflects my commitment to seeking to understand the "web of invisible social power relations that shape knowledge and experience" (Smith, 1992, p. 90) as a means of confronting inequities and injustices. In doing so, I adopt an interpretive lens that foregrounds what is typically background, thus rendering unfamiliar the familiar (Davies, 1993; Woodrow, 1999). Through the use of a counter-narrative, I attempt to facilitate this shift in perspective by juxtaposing the notion of early childhood settings as communities of care with the proposition that, sometimes, they might be more accurately conceived as sites of violence.

To this end, I adopt Van Soest and Bryan's (1995) definition of violence "as any act or situation in which a person injures another" (p. 550). Violence can encompass "direct attacks on a person's physical or psychological integrity" as well as "destructive actions that do not involve a direct relationship between victims and perpetrators" (Van Soest & Bryant, p. 550, citing Bulham, 1985 and Salmi, 1993). As such, violence can be complex and multi-layered, a notion that I later return to and expand upon, when I explain Van Soest and Bryan's (1995) conceptualisation of violence in more detail.

Other than in relation to children and families "at-risk" and children's aggressive behaviour, *violence* is a term noticeably absent from the early childhood lexicon. Related issues of power, status and identity and how these are played out in early childhood settings, however, have recently become the focus of increasing attention. Much of this commentary has illuminated how differentials in power and status can privilege adults over children (Leavitt, 1994; Woodrow, 1999) and boys over girls (Danby, 1998; Jordan, 1995; Sims, Hutchins & Taylor, 1998), thus perpetuating age- and gender-based inequities. Yet ways in which differential power

and status are played out between early childhood educators and how these can contribute to workplace violence in early childhood settings, appear to have received little critical consideration. I offer the following counter-narrative as a provocation to stimulate further discussion.

Constructing the Counter-Narrative

For the past seven years (March, 1993 - May, 2000) I have met with Sarah, the protagonist, on at least four occasions each year to discuss her experiences and perceptions as a developing teacher. These informal, unstructured, conversational interviews began a month after Sarah enrolled in a three-year undergraduate, preservice, early childhood teacher education program. Several of our early discussions took place in Sarah's practicum settings. Following her graduation from the program, I regularly visited Sarah in her Year 1-2 classroom where she established an informal, project-centred learning environment for six to seven year olds, despite the highly structured school environment and the skepticism of her colleagues who were committed to traditional teaching practices. When Sarah and I first began meeting we were positioned respectively as student teacher and teacher educator. More recently, we have met as colleagues (one of us field-based; the other university-based), with a common interest in the complexity and challenges of professional practice. I have audio-taped and transcribed our discussions, and returned the transcripts, as well as a draft of this counter-narrative to Sarah for verification and comment.

Now 25 years old, Sarah recently obtained a position as a teacher of three-to four-year olds in a 100-place, community-managed preschool serving families of mixed socio-economic backgrounds in a semi-rural community. After three years of attempting to justify her informal teaching philosophies to mostly unreceptive colleagues in her previous school workplace, she was delighted to be moving to an environment that had potential to be considerably more progressive. The director of the preschool, who had been appointed two years previously, was keen to incorporate philosophies associated with the Reggio Emilia preschools in Northern Italy (for

elaboration, see Edwards, Gandini & Forma, 1998). Sarah knew a little about these philosophies, as she regularly attended an informal discussion group formed by teachers interested in the principles and practices of Reggio Emilia. Her interest in Reggio Emilia and her reputation as an outstanding young teacher were instrumental in obtaining her new appointment.

The counter-narrative draws only from the transcripts of our two most recent conversations spanning January 2000, when Sarah commenced her new position, to April 2000, when she resigned from this position. When selecting excerpts for inclusion, I was conscious of wanting to preserve the dramatic tension that had been apparent in Sarah's original telling of her account of her experiences in this position. I also wanted to convey a sense of the high regard I have for Sarah. As well, I wanted her "voice" and her interpretation of the events that unfolded to be "heard". As such, the counter-narrative can be considered a "naturalistic portrayal" (MacLure & Stronach, 1993, p. 354), and one that privileges Sarah's perspectives over those of the other characters in the counter-narrative.

At the same time, I wanted to discourage "a naive reading" of Sarah's account (MacLure & Stronach, 1993, p. 369). For this reason, I tried to create a text that illuminated and problematised differences in power and status and how these differences, as represented in the portrayals of Sarah, the protagonist, Helen, the preschool director, and Fay, a teacher's assistant, contributed to the enactment of violence. To maintain this focus, I excluded several sub plots and secondary themes, such as Sarah's doubts about whether teaching could provide a satisfying and sustaining career. These doubts had been surfacing for some 18 months prior to her accepting her new position and are described elsewhere (Sumsion, under review). Throughout, pseudonyms have been used and identifying circumstances altered to preserve anonymity.

Sarah's Account

The counter-narrative begins with Sarah conveying her excitement about her new appointment. She recalled:

I was really excited about moving to a centre where the philosophies fitted in so well with my beliefs and where I wouldn't have to always be justifying my beliefs. And I really liked the way that Helen [the director] was so excited about all the changes she wanted to implement. I had never worked with someone who was so passionate. That was another reason I was so keen to take the job.

Nevertheless, Sarah had some reservations about the pace of change that Helen envisaged and her expectations that Sarah would be a "change agent". All but one of the other three teachers in the preschool (as well as Sarah's predecessor) were accustomed to implementing a structured, formal program that incorporated, for example, extensive use of worksheets to "prepare" children for school. Not surprisingly, Sarah soon realised, these teachers were apprehensive about the foreshadowed changes. She continued:

I could see in Helen my sense of enthusiasm and wanting to jump ahead and to implement new ideas with such excitement. But at the same time, I could see that you have to realise that other people can't always run with you as quickly, and that you can't change everything straight away. Sometimes you have to reassure people that changes can't happen overnight. But it was great to have a boss that I could relate to, and to know that she was supportive of the ideas that I was bringing with me.

Almost immediately, Sarah sensed strong resistance from Fay, a teaching assistant who worked along side her in the classroom. She explained:

Right from the start an awkward relationship between my assistant Fay and I started brewing. I knew that there was something not quite right but I chose to let it go because I was new. You know how, when you are new, you take things more to heart, because you're still getting a feel for the place?

Basically, I felt very judged by Fay. The first words she said to me were "So, tell us about your background experience and exactly why you got this job". They were not welcoming words. Very quickly it got to the stage where I was really uncomfortable teaching around her. She constantly criticised my approach and she constantly compared me to past teachers. She told me that I only got the job because of my creative interviewing technique. And she wanted to know what gave me the right to come into a preschool that had been working so well and change things.

Fay had a reputation for successfully resisting change, as Sarah explained:

When Sue [one of the other teachers] asked how I was going, I could sense her underlying concern. So I took a risk and said "Well, I feel uncomfortable about Fay, but I guess, apart from that, I'm doing OK". And she said, "Well, you're not the first". Then she let me in on the issues that have been in the past. Apparently Fay had liked the previous director much better than Helen, and enjoyed it when Helen seemed to be struggling. And I was part of the instrument she was using to get at Helen.

Sarah also became aware of tensions between Helen, the director, and most of the other teachers. She recounted, for example, how:

Sue had wanted to include a question in my interview about how I cope with conflict. And Helen had rapped her over the knuckles for that. "I don't want to hear you asking that. People don't need to be dealing with that in an interview", she told Sue. So maybe Helen was hiding things a bit. I think that might have been her way of coping with things.

An ongoing concern, Sarah sensed, was Helen's close relationship with Andrea, the only teacher already implementing practices influenced by Reggio Emilia philosophies, and her seeming disregard for other staff. Sarah elaborated:

I got the impression from Sue that most of the staff didn't know where they stood with Helen. It was really clear that Andrea was her favourite, though. Andrea is a brilliant teacher; she's absolutely amazing. She was the role model. It was like Helen was saying "She is what I want this place to be". But Andrea is there until 9.30 pm., some nights. People can't keep up with that.

Sarah tried to ignore these undercurrents and tensions. Instead, she concentrated on developing a more positive relationship with Fay, her teaching assistant. She noted:

I kept trying to talk to Fay about how I was feeling. I would say things like "I'd really like at some stage to find a time where we can just talk because it's clear that we are not comfortable with each other". And she would jump in straight away and say "Well, that's a load of rubbish because I'm comfortable with you". She kept denying that there was a problem so I had nothing to work with. I really put myself on the line. I even said to her, "Look, if I'm doing something that is hard for you that other teachers haven't done, or whatever, tell me, because I'd rather know." But she kept saying that there was absolutely no problem. She also started telling others that I was making it all up. The parents started clueing in and the atmosphere became really stifling.

Eventually, Sarah approached Helen, the director, for assistance. She explained:

When I realised that I didn't know how to handle the situation, I spoke to Helen and she organised a meeting of the three of us. It was a difficult meeting. I would say something and Fay would say, "I really don't think that happened. You know that you can come to me whenever you need to". I felt very patronised.

Later, Helen said to me, "Look, I completely understand where you're coming from. I could see that the way she treated you was absolutely disgraceful. But I didn't want to step in, because it's your territory". I think that the whole situation was difficult for Helen; I don't think she knew how to handle it.

In Sarah's view, Helen was unable to suggest any viable strategies for resolving the conflict. She recalled:

We tried some more after school meetings with the three of us but Fay complained that staying behind for an extra couple of hours meant that her pay was now down to about $5 per hour. Besides, we weren't really getting anywhere because she was still denying that there was a problem.

So then, Helen suggested that I could move into another classroom and work with another assistant. At first, that sounded great, but then I thought, "No, the problem here is Fay. So you don't move the teacher out of her classroom; you move the assistant. And anyway, what's that going to look like to the parents?" Helen said, "Oh, don't worry about that, it won't look like anything". But I knew that it would!

Then, Helen tried to get Fay to move out of my room and she wouldn't have a bar of it. She said that she wanted to stay where she had been for the last 13 years. And at that stage, Helen said "You know, Sarah, I feel as if I've got no power to do anything".

Tensions escalated and Sarah felt increasingly distressed. She explained:

Fay was very influential in the centre and I started to feel like I was being entangled by one of those choking vines. She told people that I had no behaviour management skills. So then I started getting snide comments from all sorts of people. And that was really hard because the more she put me down, the less control I had because I was loosing my self-esteem and ability. And she wasn't prepared to get involved in any of the programming, or any of the setting up, so I was getting bogged down in the sheer amount of work that I had to do. And the more pressure I was under, the more I started falling apart and the more fuel Fay had for her fire, the more it proved her point.

The situation was a real mess. I was so emotionally affected by it all that I wasn't sleeping well at night. I'd wake up in the morning and I'd start crying at the thought of having to go to work. That was the thing that scared me. I was just not coping.

I tried to pull myself together. I tried to talk to Helen about what was going on. Most of the time she tried to be very understanding but on one occasion, she just lost it. She said "You know, I hear your needs and I know that you have needs, but I've got needs, too, you know. You're telling me that you're not getting any sleep at the moment. Well, think of me and my family".

She did apologise later, and I give her credit for that. I knew that she was hurting inside and that she had massive pressures on her. After all, she was basically running a business and she felt that she really had to push the Reggio agenda so that she could "sell" the centre.

But when she said "You know, Sarah, I don't think there is anything more I can do for you. I just don't understand what I need to be doing", I knew then that I couldn't stay. I felt so emotionally damaged. I felt as if I was just getting smaller and smaller, I didn't feel confident that I could survive.

Soon after this conversation Sarah resigned from the position she had accepted with so much excitement three months previously.

Deconstructing the Counter-Narrative

Sarah's account lends itself to multiple interpretations. To borrow from Davies' (1993) analogy of a kaleidoscope, each incident or fragment of the counter-narrative can reflect different meanings, depending on one's perspective. Variously, then, amongst other possibilities, this tale might be interpreted as primarily, one of inadequate leadership, lack of resilience, the dynamics of interpersonal conflict, or the difficulties of implementing change.

My interpretation of the counter-narrative was informed by Van Soest and Bryant's (1995) conceptualisation of violence, introduced earlier. As Herr (1999), who also adopted their framework to explore violence in an educational [high school] setting, noted, "We are not accustomed to naming everyday actions that diminish

human capacity as violence, and [so] they go unrecognized, unnamed, and unchallenged" (p. 245). I anticipated, therefore, that Van Soest and Bryant's (1995) conceptualisation might alert me to "hidden meanings, silences, contradictions and sites of power" (Canella, 1997, p. 16). More broadly, in drawing attention to aspects of Sarah's account that might not otherwise be visible, I sensed a potential to disrupt the prevailing non-critical discourses of communities of care, thus creating space for alternative readings that might better illuminate the complexities of the emotional landscapes of early childhood settings.

Moving now to the second section of this article, I briefly explain Van Soest and Bryant's (1995) conceptualisation of violence and then consider how it might inform our reading of Sarah's account. I reiterate that what follows is only one of many possible interpretations.

Van Soest and Bryant's Conceptualisation of Violence

Van Soest and Bryant (1995) identify three levels of violence: individual, institutional, and structural. Individual violence is the most visible, they contend, because "it usually involves direct actions and means and immediate consequences" (p. 550). Consequently, "the perpetrator and his or her motivations and the victim and his or her injuries can be identified and assessed" (p. 550). In contrast, institutional violence is almost invisible. It includes harmful actions by organisations and institutions that "obstruct the spontaneous unfolding of human potential" (p. 551). Institutional violence is generally more complex than individual violence because it is frequently "subtle, indirect, and covert" (p. 551). Structural-cultural violence, in which individual and institutional violence is embedded, is even more difficult to discern. Essentially, it involves accepting or embracing dominant ideologies that perpetuate or exacerbate damaging inequities.

Within each level, according to Van Soest and Bryant (1995) citing Salmi (1993), there are three types of violence, namely: "(1) omission — failing to help someone in need, (2) repression — depriving people of their rights, and (3) alienation — depriving people of self-esteem and identity" (p. 353). Additionally, within each

type of violence they distinguish three dimensions, according to the perpetrator of that violence: "(1) interpersonal — a person or small group doing harm to others, (2) intrapersonal— a person doing harm to self, and (3) collective— a group ... doing harm to others" (p. 553). In my view, many of these levels, types and dimensions of violence are manifested in Sarah's account of her workplace experiences.

Manifestations of Violence in Sarah's Account

In Sarah's account, as Van Soest and Bryant (1995) foreshadowed, individual violence is arguably the most visible. Within this level, all three types of violence — omission, repression, and alienation — are evident. In many of the incidents portrayed, Fay, who had the least official power and status of the three key characters in the counter-narrative, was positioned as the perpetrator of violence. In dismissing Sarah's perceptions of tensions in their relationship, for example, Fay attempted to block Sarah's efforts to address and resolve these tensions (omission). Fay also refused to acknowledge Sarah's right to assistance with programming or setting up activities (repression). Moreover, in undermining Sarah's professional credibility, Fay contributed to the erosion of Sarah's self-esteem and identity (alienation). These examples of interpersonal violence are not intended to imply that Fay was the only perpetrator of violence but, rather, to illustrate how violence can arise from marginalisation within formal hierarchies of power and status and also constitute a form of unofficial power and status (Kenway, Fitzclarence & Hasluck, 2000).

Again at an individual level, self-inflicted, intrapersonal violence by all three key characters was evident in destructive, self-damaging acts that exacerbated existing pressures. By continuing to deny that tensions had arisen, for example, Fay rejected opportunities to participate in conversations that may have enabled her to participate more fully in decision-making processes concerning change (omission). Similarly, by refusing to allow interview questions that probed Sarah's likely response to conflict, Helen turned down an opportunity to make a more informed decision about Sarah's suitability for the position (repression). And, driven by her desire to "save face", in dismissing Helen's offer of moving to another classroom and working with a different

teaching assistant, Sarah chose to remain in a situation that continued to undermine her self-esteem and professional identity (alienation).

Examples of violence at the institutional or organisational level are also manifested throughout the counter-narrative. If, as Sarah suggests, the entrenched collective culture of the preschool staff and management committee precluded confronting Fay about her history of resisting change and the subsequent tensions that her actions allegedly inflamed, the organisational climate could be said to be complicit in condoning workplace violence (omission). Moreover, the sanctioning of the apparent imposition of the "top down" changes within the preschool could be construed as denying staff the right to voice their reservations and dissent (repression). Similarly, the teachers' perceptions that they had been excluded from informal networks because they were not prepared to work what they saw as the excessively long hours needed to implement change hints at marginalisation (alienation).

These examples of individual and institutional violence are embedded in violence at a structural-cultural level, for the most part emanating from prevailing neo-liberal ideologies that frame pedagogical issues within the discourse of market competition (Press, 1999). In the subtext of the counter-narrative, we learn that, according to Sarah, Helen's rush to implement a Reggio Emilia-inspired program was driven partially by the need to position the preschool strategically to ensure a competitive advantage. Within the Australian context, the withdrawal of government subsidies has meant that the development of effective marketing strategies has become increasingly necessary for the survival of many early childhood settings (Press, 1999). In many ways, therefore, the broader community's condoning of competition policies that relegate the provision of children's services to the mechanics of market forces, despite their very evident limitations (for elaboration, see Press, 1999), constitutes a collective act of omission and repudiation of its social responsibilities.

Cost minimisation is central to these market ideologies, hence the perpetuation of disproportionately low wages, excessive responsibilities, and routine expectations of unpaid overtime (Lyons, 1997) that Fay alludes to in her refusal to participate in after-hours programming meetings. Yet the effective operation of the preschool is

predicated on the willingness of individuals to accept responsibility for the survival of the organisation, albeit at considerable personal expense. In challenging this premise and refusing to provide Sarah with the programming assistance to which, according to the organisation, she is entitled, Fay can be portrayed as perpetrating violence, at an individual level, against Sarah. Yet, as the most poorly paid and most lowly situated in the organisational hierarchy, Fay is the most disadvantaged by expectations that as an early childhood educator she should be willing to forgo reasonably employment entitlements [such as paid overtime or payment in accordance with responsibilities]. From a structural-cultural perspective, therefore, Fay is also a victim of violence.

The invidiousness of the managerialist discourses that equate the provision of early childhood education with the operation of a corporate enterprise are evident in the adoption of terms such as "industry" and "manager" by the early childhood field. This pervasive managerialism, Morely and Rassool (2000) contend, "has glamorised the manager" (p.197) and encouraged "unproblematic construction[s] of leadership" (p.180). Thus, we see guides to effective management and leadership of early childhood settings premised on seemingly unrealistic assumptions that leaders possess, or can readily acquire, super-human, omniscient attributes. When human limitations result in a reality that falls short of these idealised constructions, "elaborate procedures for impression management" can come into play (Morely and Rassool, 2000, p.181). Helen's apparent tendency to downplay the seriousness of the conflicts and tensions within the preschool hints suggests that she may be engaging in impression management. In turn, her actions seem to have contributed to the diminished self-esteem and professional identity of her staff (alienation). In this sense, at an individual level, she can said to be a perpetrator of violence. At a structural-cultural level, though, she is simultaneously as a victim of violence in her somewhat unsuccessful struggle to fulfil glamorised managerialist expectations of leadership have diminished her own self-esteem and professional identity. Thus, again, we see an interplay between the "multilayered manifestations of violence" (Herr, 1999, p. 243) overlooked in unproblematised constructions of early childhood settings as communities of care.

Discussion

Drawing on Van Soest and Bryant's (1995) conceptualisation of violence to deconstruct this counter-narrative has resulted in a bleaker representation of an early childhood setting than is customarily portrayed. The question inevitably arises, what, if anything, might be gained from such a sombre interpretation?

Above all, it seems to me that the interpretation offered here reaffirms the importance of calls for a more explicit focus on the ecologies of early childhood settings, including the qualities and dynamics of leadership (Kagan, 2000; Kagan & Bowman, 1997). Indeed, it would be difficult to disagree with Rodd's claim that "the development of leadership skills is a vital and crucial challenge for early childhood professionals" (1998, p. xviii). How to approach this challenge is the currently the focus of considerable discussion. Culkin (2000), for example, calls for the introduction of credentials for early childhood directors, while Rodd (1998) argues for the reinforcement of managerialist concepts of a leader "who influences others in order to administer an efficient, accountable small business or organisation, which includes adult staff and consumers" (p.4). In my view, the Van Soest and Bryant-informed interpretation of the counter-narrative offered in this article cautions against uncritically embracing these calls.

Take, for example, Morgan's (2000, p. 55) claim that the ability to "facilitate the development of a community among staff" and to provide "for staff development and support" is required of directors of early childhood programs. An important indicator of this competency, she contends, is the ability to resolve conflict between staff. Again, it is difficult to disagree. Yet training programs designed to achieve the multitude of competencies prescribed for effective leadership may be insufficient to address the complex issues that emerge when the counter-narrative is viewed through the lens of Van Soest and Bryant's (1995) conceptualisation of violence. Yet such programs could be counterproductive if, in expecting Herculean feats from individuals, they absolve organisations, and the wider community from responsibility for work place violence of the kind portrayed in the counter-narrative. Indeed,

competency-based policies and training could conceivably exacerbate the endemic sense of inadequacy experienced by many early childhood educators (Jorde Bloom, 2000).

While acknowledging the importance of fostering skills that enhance interpersonal and team relationships, it seems essential to locate such efforts within a critical consideration of the organisational, ideological and socio-political contexts of early childhood educators' work. While there has been some attempt to do so (see, for example, Hayden, 1996), insufficient attention, I believe, has been given to issues of power, status, identity, and structural inequities that may have contributed to the work-place violence portrayed in this counter-narrative. The following questions might be helpful in interrogating frequently taken-for-granted assumptions about the work environments of early childhood settings.

- How might we best expose and address structural violence against early childhood education, young children and early childhood educators?
- How can we prevent structural violence from filtering down into early childhood work places and manifesting itself as organisational and individual violence?
- How do unofficial hierarchies of influence and power within early childhood settings intersect with official hierarchies of influence and power?
- What connections exist between power, marginality and violence (Kenway et al., 2000?).
- What investments have early childhood educators made in their professional identities, and how might these investments be threatened or advantaged by change?
- How can we promote responsibility and interdependence amongst early childhood educators, without perpetuating inequities?
- More specifically, how can we organise responsibilities so that they "do not exacerbate inequities?" (Baines, Evans & Neysmith, 1998, p. 15).
- How can we find more effective ways to develop and maintain respectful dialogue and to find "new ways to communicate about problems, injustices, fears and anxieties" (Kenway et al., 2000, p.150).

Questions such as these, and their implications for early childhood workplaces, would be well suited to exploration within the critical, collaborative groups proposed by Woodrow and Fasoli (1998).

Conclusion

My purpose in this article has been to problematise non-critical discourses about early childhood settings as communities as care. Van Soest and Bryant's (1995) conceptualisation of violence has been helpful, I suggest, in drawing attention to the issue of workplace violence in early childhood settings and, particularly, to the structural and political forces that can have an adverse impact on the ecologies of early childhood settings. By making visible forces that might otherwise remain invisible, we may be able to work more effectively towards realising ideals of early childhood settings as communities of care.

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