

Silencing Children About 'Forbidden' Topics: Discussing Prevention Education in Australian Early Childhood

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Abstract

Over three decades ago the United Nations developed the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; United Nations, 1989) which was aimed at ensuring children were positioned as active agents in their lives, capable of having a voice and participating in decision-making on issues that affected them. Australia ratified the UNCRC in 1990, however implementation required changes in relevant laws, policies and practices which is a complex process (Alston & Brennan, 1991). Whilst ratification provided the Australian Federal Government "an historic opportunity" (Cass, 1991, p. 28) time has proven that change remains limited by the "imbalances of power and resources which are deeply embedded in the way we live and are organised" as originally feared by Parker (1991, p. 19). This discussion paper explores barriers limiting the capacity to change and speculates on ways in which progress might still be made to enhance the ways in which Australia as a nation honours the promise made when UNCRC was ratified. This is important for teacher educators to ensure our teachers embed teaching practices that prevent childhood sexual abuse. This will be of interest to those who design teacher education courses and policy makers.

Keywords:

Teacher Education, Early Childhood Education, Children's Voices, Trauma, Sex Education

Introduction

Recent years in Australia have seen a resurgence of right wing ideology similar to that seen around the world (Hart, 2021). Accompanying this swing towards the right is a narrative of protection: in particular, protecting the national culture from outside influences (Flannery et al., 2021). Whilst this is normally exemplified by rejection of multiculturalism and strong support for nationalism, these characteristics are underpinned by a focus on in-group cohesion and rejection of out-groups. In-groups create and maintain social narratives, whilst out-groups are perceived to threaten these narratives; they are seen as likely to change them, a threat to the status quo (Flannery et al., 2021). This impacts the positioning of children in society, and the ways educators interact with them.



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In this discussion paper, we outline the challenges educators face when society deems children powerless, silences their voices, and enforces this silence through policy. We then discuss the ways educators can resist these notions to promote children's agency and protect children from sexual abuse.

Challenges

Power in Society

Traditionally in Australian society (and many other western societies) children are not considered part of the group that holds power, the group that runs society. Rather, in many ways, they are positioned as out-group members until the time they mature, and have been sufficiently educated to maintain the status quo as adult citizens, to maintain the national narrative as it has been. With the authoritarianism that comes with right-wing compliance welfare and weakened human rights based safeguards (Ottmann, 2020), as members of an out-group, children are silenced, and must rely on others, usually parents, to speak for them, to make decisions for them (ostensibly in their best interests) and to protect them. In this narrative, children are positioned as innocent, in need of protection, justifying placing them as powerless members of an out-group. Indeed, the safety narrative positions children's innocence as at risk should they be exposed to certain kinds of information, thus it is argued to be in their best interests to restrict their access to 'forbidden' knowledge to avoid corrupting them (Shevlin & Gill, 2020). Certain types of knowledge are perceived, rather like a virus, as capable of spreading, corrupting children. Thus particular information can be "deviant, dangerous and potentially catching" (Rawlings & Loveday, 2022, p. 856). Topics such as gender diversity and sexuality fall clearly into the category of controversial; topics that threaten children's innocence, therefore children need to be protected from such knowledge in order to ensure their safety. Whilst great progress has been made by parents, adults, institutions and agencies to support children in ways not perceived decades ago, clearly more needs to be done.

One example of this quarantining of knowledge to protect children is the knowledge associated with sex. Given that appropriate forms of sex education are found to help prevent sexual violence (Wazlawik et al., 2017), it has been argued for many years that one of the best ways to protect children from sexual abuse is to teach them appropriate forms of touch, and ways to behave when they experience inappropriate forms of touch (Lu et al., 2022; Russell et al., 2020). There are now many effective prevention programs that educators should be made aware of in their initial teacher education courses as an effective way to reduce risks and harm. Apart from

the inclusion of age-appropriate discussions about appropriate forms of touch and consent, the program emphasises the need for children to tell a trusted adult (Finkelhor, 2009; Rudolph et al., 2018). Additionally, the programs emphasise the need for parent-educator communication to ensure children feel safe sharing information and asking questions. This positions children as active agents in their own lives, as mandated in 1990 when the Australian Government ratified the UNCROC.

Van Der Kolk (2014) describes the hidden prevalence of children and adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse in our societies so it is clear that despite decades of research reporting the importance of providing age-appropriate sex education, the topic remains controversial in Australia (Shannon, 2022) with many students reporting the information they received as inadequate and incomplete (Waling et al., 2020). Whilst all adults could be positioned as responsible for children's safety, some have mandatory responsibilities, such as school teachers and early childhood educators. In addition to training about their mandatory reporting responsibilities, educators and school teachers need to be provided with training in trauma informed support to ensure they are supporting children who have experienced trauma.

It should be noted that apart from age-appropriate information, all children need information about prevention. Conversely, children who have not been exposed to sexual violence do not need the same level of information that children who have been exposed might need. Therefore, care through specialists such as sexual abuse support workers and counsellors is needed and ideally all adults need to provide sufficient information to give children agency over their safety, as well as knowledge to recognise the signals that suggest more in-depth support may be required.

Tailoring the necessary information, and identifying relevant signals to children's levels of understanding is essential. Research with very young children is limited but there are now screening tools being developed that help educators identify concerning signs in infants and toddlers (Bisagno et al., 2023). Forensic interview techniques are now well established with children as young as 2 years of age (Fernandes et al., 2023) although research with parents of children aged one to five years has to date not demonstrated improvements in parental efficacy in sexual communication with their children (Ferguson et al., 2023). Whilst we know that education programmes for children are more successful over the age of 8 years (Lu et al., 2023), it remains important that all children, irrespective of their age, should be able to be heard and encouraged to ask questions. Both educators and school teachers need to understand how children's voices are silenced in society, and how this is enabled through policies.

Silencing Children's Voices

Notwithstanding this, the voices of children who experience sexual violence are often silenced; it is as if they, as survivors, are sharing information that is inappropriate for children when they speak about their experiences (Rogers et al., 2022). In a sense, their voicelessness can be constructed as the tension between their right to speak (freedom of speech) and political correctness. The latter is a space where it is believed that knowledge inappropriate for children should be censored and silenced (Shevlin & Gill, 2020). In this perspective, children who have experienced sexual violence and survived should be silenced and hidden so their experiences do not contaminate the innocence of other children.

Children's experience of sexual violence often starts in the home, or a place where a trusted adult is present (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022; Gilmore, 2017). This makes hearing their voices more problematic, because in order to survive their childhood, children often block out their experiences (Van Der Kolk, 2014). Trauma can resurface through various behaviours and emotions, often making relationships difficult in both childhood and adulthood. There is evidence that the earlier the maltreatment was experienced, the more frequently the trauma was experienced and exposure to multiple forms of trauma all make it more likely children will to be developmentally vulnerable throughout their early years (Green et al., 2018). This developmental vulnerability creates a foundation upon which later learning and development are based; an idea encapsulated in the pathway model of the impact of stress (Gustafsson et al., 2010). This model proposes that exposure to traumatic life events, such as sexual abuse, creates a wear and tear effect on physiology and neurobiology, creating allostatic load (Fava et al., 2023). Outcomes of chronically heightened allostatic load include a hypervigilant immune system that struggles to differentiate between major and minor threats causing chronic auto-immune diseases and increased risk of cardiovascular illnesses in later life. Exposure to stressful life events has even been demonstrated to impact on the structure of brain white matter, effects that can be traced throughout the lifespan (Poletti et al., 2023).

Children are often silenced by fear of the perpetrator. Often, they report a feeling that they were not heard. One survivor wrote:

"... telling [about the abuse] is not an option. I told them who he was [the abuser] and a very general sentence about him touching me. Two days later, I found myself at school as if nothing had happened. The educational staff did not know anything." (Attrash-Najjar & Katz, 2023, p. 5)

Male survivors feel an additional disadvantage. Given that the majority of child sexual abuse

targets are girls, male survivors often report feeling they were not believed and that their voices were eclipsed (Gill & Begum, 2023). As adults, victims find it difficult to expose family members and live with the ramification of divided families. At any age, they fear being disbelieved because perpetrators have often groomed the whole family. They also struggle to know who to trust and if they will be believed (Van Der Kolk, 2014).

The privacy of the family has often been used to avoid society's gaze (Dimopoulos, 2023), making it more difficult for children to speak about sexual violence. Roy (2004) reminds us that "there's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard" (para. 4). When children enter early childhood services and schools their world widens and there are other adults interacting with them who have the opportunity to create a safe space where children can share their experiences, receive appropriate support and education that addresses their safety needs and creates a context where they can learn more about the nature of healthy human relationships. They also need to learn how to communicate (in particular the words to use) when they are exposed to, or part of, unhealthy relationships. Whilst there remain barriers preventing children from disclosing to a trusted adult, (Brennan & McElvaney, 2020; Halvorsen et al., 2020) it is the responsibility of adults to create a space where children feel safe to disclose, and have opportunities to do so. It is adults who have the responsibility to address the multiple ways in which children are silenced.

In the next section we explore an example of silencing of children through policy. It should be noted that this is a separate issue to child sexual abuse and trauma.

Silencing through Policy

Whilst silencing operates in the context of families, communities and society, it also plays out in the public arena through policy as an extension of social control. One such example is the furore that surrounded the Safe Schools initiative offered by the Safe Schools Coalition Australia (SSCA). This initiative, developed at the end of the Rudd-Gillard government in Australia and begun by the Abbott government in June 2014, was the first national programme designed to support LGBTQAI+ school-aged children (Kurti, 2017). "The aim of the Coalition's work was to help create safer school communities for all students, especially those who were gender variant and sexually diverse" (Thompson, 2019, p. 41). The initiative began in the state of Victoria in 2010 and operated for around 5 years with minimal controversy. It was supported by federal funding from June 2014 and began to roll out across the country. In 2015 the Coalition published a teacher's guide (Safe Schools Coalition Australia, 2016) which began

immediately to receive negative publicity. A number of right wing politicians and media commentators claimed that the material “promoted radical and potentially dangerous views about sexuality and gender”; promoted homosexuality and was a threat to children’s safety (Thompson, 2019, p. 43). A significant swathe of media critiqued the content as grooming children along with encouraging sexual deviance and paedophilia; positioning, “gender diversity as being deviant, dangerous and potentially catching” (Rawlings & Loveday, 2022, p. 856). Family First Senator, Bob Day, called the programme anti-family and Nationals MP George Christensen, in a speech to Parliament “said the program recommended pornographic material, sex clubs and sex shops, among other things. He also said materials included information on chest-binding, penis-tucking and unlocking parental safety controls” (Zaglas, 2019)

Interestingly, opposition to these views became located in an anti-democratic frame, making it difficult to challenge them:

... ‘civil society’ was at risk because of a minority of people who were persecuting those with conservative views – in this case, particularly around the Safe Schools programme. As such, this problem frame represented that the solution to resisting the erosion of Western democracy and society was to reject Safe Schools (Rawlings & Loveday, 2022, p. 858).

There were a number of children’s voices speaking about the benefits of the programme. In a video available online, (<https://player.vimeo.com/video/253728005> 0:28 - 0:45), Georgie, a student who was part of a Safe Schools programme said:

I think Safe Schools coming in has relieved the pressure off me. I ended up coming out to my friends and they felt more educated and more able to support. I feel like, as a trans young person I can be out and proud.

Other students credit the Safe School programme with the lack of discrimination they experienced when they ‘came out’ at school (Alcorn, 2016a). Alcorn continues with quotes from a number of students and parents who found the Safe School experience to not only be positive, but also potentially life-saving.

A review of the programme in 2016 (Louden, 2016) recommended a number of changes including removing 3rd-party links to websites such as LGBTQIA+ websites, restricting materials to high school only, restricting some materials (e.g. OMG I’m Queer) to selected individuals only, and requiring parental consent for participation. Victoria and the ACT, at the time, elected to continue the programme in its original form (despite this resulting in withdrawal of federal funding) whilst other states agreed to the modifications identified in the review (Alcorn, 2016b). Amid ongoing calls for scrapping the programme, the NSW government later decided to substitute it for

one that had a more general focus on anti-bullying (Haydar, 2017), again silencing the voices of the LGBTQIA+ students the programme was specifically designed to include.

These examples illustrate the moral panic that surrounds the concept of children and issues relating to gender and sexuality, topics that are considered dangerous and a threat to children’s safety (Ullman et al., 2023). In this context, moral panic refers to “something or someone that can be defined as a threat to interests or values” (Rawlings & Loveday, 2022, p. 852), with the destruction of children’s innocence represented by sharing so-called unsuitable material with them risking the destruction of society (or at least society as constructed by the in-group). Despite the moral panic associated with the Australian “first national initiative for inclusion of gender and sexuality diversity,” it is clear that this policy decision “relied on negative testimonies from conservative parents” (Ullman et al., 2023, p. 1), particularly given that the research undertaken by Ullman and colleagues suggested that the majority of parents in Australia are likely to be supportive of education related to gender and sexual diversity. However, the right-wing push back against perceived threats such as this function to continue to silence children and to ensure they remain without information many identify as necessary for their wellbeing. This not only marginalises those children who have the prohibited knowledge (in the examples above children who have experienced sexual violence, children who are LGBTQIA+), but ensures the ignorance of others who do not have this knowledge, risking their future wellbeing and safety. This has major implications for early childhood education.

Discussion and Implications

Given what we know of the importance of the early childhood years in laying the foundations in brain development for future learning, health and wellbeing (Black et al., 2017; Cattani et al., 2022; Heckman & Karapakula, 2019; Spiteri, 2022; Strong Foundations, 2019), and the negative impact of chronic stress on children’s outcomes (in particular allostatic load, see Guidi et al., 2021) we argue that it is essential that early childhood educators advocate strongly for the inclusion of such ‘forbidden’ topics as those above in the early childhood curriculum. Early childhood, we argue, is an appropriate place to begin this education in age-appropriate way. The National Children’s Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy (National Mental Health Commission, 2021, p. 7) reinforces this, claiming that:

There is nothing that will have more impact on improved mental health outcomes for all Australians than early intervention. Investing in the wellbeing of children and their families will have radiating benefits throughout our communities as well as through the broader health and education systems.

The need for early intervention is paramount and this intervention must be child-centred, interdisciplinary, age and culturally appropriate, and universally available (Burgess et al., 2022; Rogers, 2021; Rogers et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2024). These are all characteristics common in early childhood pedagogy (Sims, 2011). Additionally, early childhood educators need to be trauma informed, because many children are exposed to trauma through the transgenerational transference of trauma and vicarious trauma (Branson, 2019; Tujague & Ryan, 2023). Trauma and its impacts can also be passed on to children generationally via epigenetic mechanisms (Jawaid et al., 2018; Krippner & Barrett, 2019; Ryan et al., 2016). Early childhood educators need to be particularly aware of the signs of stress children exhibit (often these are individualised, requiring extensive knowledge of each child developed through professional observation and ongoing interaction). Tools to assist in identifying signs of trauma as the first step in trauma-informed practice are now being developed (for example, Beehag et al., 2023). As a key element in trauma-informed practice, early childhood educators need a sound understanding of how best to make their services places of sanctuary (Bloom, 1995) for children. This involves recognising behaviours that might otherwise be interpreted as 'bad', as both attempts at communication and as adaptations necessary for them to manage the stresses they face (Guidi et al., 2021). As Bloom (1995, p. 4) wrote nearly 30 years ago:

The key in strategizing how to handle "bad" kids is figuring out how not to do what they are cueing us to do. These children are quite comfortable with rejection, abuse, harsh discipline, unrealistic expectations, hostility, and pain. This is normal for them; it is predictable and in this predictability they feel some tenuous form of safety. They invite rejection; they set up situations in which it is extremely difficult for us to resist treating them in kind. They are not comfortable with firm but fair limits, realistic and clear expectations, kindness, understanding, respect and compassion. They will see this behaviour as suspicious, threatening, unpredictable and terribly frightening until they have tested it repeatedly to see if the safety holds.

More recent research adds to Bloom's ideas, adding the concept of self-regulation as a key factor in supporting children who have experienced trauma, or who are currently experiencing trauma to reduce levels of anxiety and challenging behaviours (Emerson, 2022). Thus understanding how self-regulation develops (Wu et al., 2021), and its links to prerequisite skills such as emotional regulation (Gagne et al., 2021) become important components of early childhood professionals' toolbox of knowledge. Early childhood educators need to develop skills in co-regulating the emotions of very young children, carefully scaffolding their levels of emotional regulation and gradually encouraging children to take responsibility for self-regulation (Thomas, 2021). Many educators and school teachers are now benefiting from trauma informed practice training (e.g. Australian Childhood Foundation <https://professionals.childhood.org.au/training-development/>).

Whilst focusing on a social-emotional pedagogy is considered a standard element of current early childhood practice (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009), the inclusion of information addressing the underlying causes of children's stress and trauma (such as the 'forbidden topics' of gender and sexuality) is not easy as the right-wing swing is reflected not only in the political arena but in communities of parents who also reject the rights of their children to access certain (prohibited) information. For example, in their study Shevlin and Gill (2020, p. 16) found that for a number of parents:

The existence of open homosexuals was viewed as defiant. The implication was that there is an unwarranted challenge to heterosexual power by homosexuals. Furthermore, implicit in their scorn of open homosexuality was a desire for homosexuals to become closeted, ashamed and subordinated. This would allow for heterosexuals to avoid the threat that open homosexuality poses to their ego... Despite implicit acknowledgement of homosexual oppression, these parents expressed the feeling of oppression as heterosexuals.

However, a focus on strategies that address the consequences of stress and trauma in children without simultaneously focusing on providing information and support addressing the causes of the stress and trauma is rather like worrying without the ability to change anything. As long as children continue to be harmed by the stress and trauma associated with sexual violence and heteronormativity, early childhood educators will always need to manage their challenging coping behaviours. Social emotional early childhood pedagogy must be accompanied by the ability to provide children with the necessary information to understand how to reduce the risks of exposure to sexual violence, and to affirm who they are irrespective of their gender expression.

In the next sections, we discuss the need for further research and summarise the article.

Need For Further Research

This discussion paper has revealed the need for further research. A desk review of ITE course inclusion of these sensitive topics, along with trauma informed support from unit outlines available on the internet might reveal the prevalence and depth of such topics. Additionally, there is a need to find out from educators their level of knowledge, competence and confidence in supporting children and families who experience sexual trauma.

Conclusion

Early childhood educators are immersed in community, societal and policy frameworks that support silencing around forbidden topics for young children. Challenging this silencing is not easy and those who choose to do so can often be aggressively attacked for their attempts. For example Maughan et

al. (2022) write about the institutional transphobia that created multiple barriers for a student attempting to research transgender issues in early childhood. In a similar manner, the early childhood educators in Shevlin and Gill (2020)'s study had to negotiate the negative parental perceptions about the Safe Schools Programme. If early childhood educators are to address these forbidden topics (and we believe they should) they need a supportive community around them; a community that assists them to offer opportunities for all children to address inclusion, to ensure all children feel valued, accepted and supported. They need extensive preparation in their pre-service studies to understand why and how to undertake this important task. This should include access to both preventative education and trauma informed support programs. Parents also need support and early childhood educators have a role in helping all parents understand the impact of prejudice and exclusion on children, and the ways in which they can help to ensure all children feel valued and accepted for who they are. Again, working with parents is an important element of pre-service preparation for early childhood educators, and this preparation needs to include working with parents on difficult and forbidden topics. When we are able to support all children to be who they are we will be able to fulfil Bloom's (1995, pp. 429 - 430) dream:

... we need to learn to function as an orchestra, sometimes performing a classical symphony, but more usually improvising jazz. Wonderful music requires many different kinds of instruments, with different ranges, different tones, and different levels of participation. But they all must be properly tuned and able to make the appropriate individual contribution to the whole. The best music happens when each individual musician is a virtuoso who integrates his or her unique creative gift with other gifted performers until the results of their efforts make a melody and a harmony, a sound that is far greater than that of each individual alone.

Echoing this, Van Der Kolk (2014, p. 356) explains that many of our great innovators of "social change have intimate personal knowledge of trauma... (due to) insights and passions that came from having dealt with devastation". He goes on to say that the "same is true of societies" such as advances due to the Great Depression and wars (Van Der Kolk, 2014, p. 356). He also states,

trauma is now our most urgent public health issues and we have the knowledge necessary to respond effectively. The choice is ours to act on what we know (Van Der Kolk, 2014, p. 356).

Empowering children's voices and training educators in how to prevent abuse, and support children's experiences of trauma and difference is a first and very necessary step. In turn, this will enable children to be active agents in their own lives, as mandated by the UNCROC. Ensuring our pre-service teacher training courses equip educators to ensure they have

the knowledge, competence and confidence to support children's voices in this area is essential.

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