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Advancing an LGBTI Inclusive Curriculum in Scotland Through Critical Literacy

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Abstract

Following the announcement, in November 2018, that Scotland would be the first educational system to introduce an LGBTI inclusive curriculum in all of its state schools, this position paper advocates critical literacy as a theoretically congruent framework within which LGBTI issues can be explored. We suggest educators could do this by problematising social structures and language practices including our own professional actions beyond what we teach; and by using children's literature to actively teach LGBTI issues and to open up spaces for discussion of these issues across curricular areas. What we propose is challenging in a Scottish educational context since Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) presents critical literacy as 'finding and using information' and it is not grounded in any wider theoretical basis, effectively removing the active, challenging and transformative aspects of critical literacy pedagogies. As Vasquez et al argue (2013), one of the key ways for teachers to engage with critical literacy is through the literature on its implementation in different contexts; in this position paper we hope to provide both a theoretical framework and practice accounts of LGBTI education from the wider literature to inform the development of an LGBTI inclusive curriculum in Scotland and elsewhere.

Advancing an LGBTI Inclusive Curriculum in Scotland Through Critical Literacy

Key words: LGBTI inclusive curriculum, critical literacy, Scotland education

Introduction

In this position paper, we advance an argument about the ways in which a critical literacy stance might support the development and implementation of an LGBTI curriculum. When it was announced, in November 2018, that Scotland would be the first educational system to embed learning and teaching about LGBTI issues in all of its state schools, it was heralded as “a monumental victory” for campaigners for LGBTI rights and education (Peterkin, 2018). In response to the announcement, Blair Wilson - a young man who had been subject to a violent homophobic attack in July 2018 and was praised by Scotland’s First Minister Nicola Sturgeon for his response to the crime - announced that he had “never been more proud to be Scottish” (BBC, 2018). The Scottish Government has stated that schools will decide how LGBTI issues are taught within the broader framework of Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Government, 2009); this is in keeping with Scottish educational practice, in which education is devolved from the Scottish Government to local authorities, and then to local schools, in which head teachers are responsible for curricular management and implementation. We believe that critical literacy should be a fundamental aspect of educational practices, and embedded in Scottish educational policy and practice. We begin by exploring how critical literacy is conceptualised in the literature, before critically considering its positioning in Scottish educational policy, then turning to accounts of how LGBTI issues are being taught in other countries and contexts, with the overarching aim of demonstrating how a critical literacy stance aligns well with the aim of developing an LGBTI inclusive curriculum in Scotland, and elsewhere.

Critical literacy

We conceive of critical literacy as a stance, as a way of seeing and acting in the world and of teaching across the curriculum, in line with key scholars such as Vasquez (2010, 2013), Janks (2010) and Comber (2015) and Vasquez, Janks and Comber (2019), who have demonstrated how critical literacy, an approach that is rooted in Freirean critical pedagogical theory (1970), can be operationalised in school settings. One of the key ways that educators can engage students in critical literacy is through close examination and exploration of how power works in texts to advantage some groups over others (Luke, 2012), and the ways in which hegemonies of power - along intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality – are constructed and reinforced by structures and practices within schools and wider society. The power these hegemonies have to shape children's identities through the socialisation process has been called the hidden curriculum; that is, children learn about gender, class and race through social and language practices enacted in schools. The hidden curriculum is a hegemony of power which is simultaneously shaped by dominant social constructions whilst shaping those who experience it (McLaren, 2016).

Teachers who use a critical literacy approach ground their pedagogical practices in challenge and critique, with the ultimate aim of social change and transformation for the betterment of not just the children they teach but wider society. This requires that educators understand how hegemonies of power are constructed and maintained in and by educational structures and practices in order to enact critical pedagogies. Kanpol explains that teachers who enact critical pedagogies:

challenge stereotyping, find ways to subvert tracking through alternative teaching methodologies, build curriculum with open and critical spirits, become involved in the policy-oriented decisions of the state and local school district site, and form group solidarity over issues of value-laden importance (1999: 39).

This perspective aligns very well with the argument we are advancing here; namely, that teaching about LGBTI issues requires educators to confront and examine their own perspectives and stances, to open up classroom spaces to discussions about gender and sexuality-linked stereotyping and to address the exclusion and bullying of LGBTI people in Scottish schools and communities more widely. In these ways, it is possible to build the curriculum with open and critical spirits, as Kanpol urges us to do.

Page states that a “negative school environment not only affects students’ attitudes toward school but also impacts students’ academic achievement and goals” (2017a: 347), and cites statistics from the United States about the increased likelihood that LGBTI students who had experienced harassment at school would not consider post-secondary education. In light of the Scottish Government’s (2019) national priority of closing the attainment gap and improving long-term outcomes for children born into poverty, it can be seen also that long-term outcomes for LGBTI children and young people are of concern and need to be addressed to achieve greater equity.

Critical literacy as a transformative social practice is perhaps most commonly associated with Paulo Freire. Freire’s highly influential work has shaped the research and practice of many critical literacy scholars, including Vasquez, Janks and Comber who argue that:

Freire's work was groundbreaking as it pushed to the fore the importance and effects of critical pedagogy as a way of making visible and examining relations of power in order to change and dismantle inequitable ways of being (2019: 301).

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) Freire advocated the development of critical awareness in students using problem-posing pedagogy, which is essentially a dialogic approach or critical dialogue between teachers as facilitators and students, learning from each other and collectively creating multiple layers of meaning in their understanding of print, spoken and lived texts. Through the process of posing and discussing problems, Freire argued, we hone our power to perceive the world critically, and recognise that it is not a static reality, but a "reality in process" (1970: 64). Freire believed that this development of critical consciousness was essential for active engagement and participation in democratic society.

Being curious as educators who take a critical literacy stance means recognising the ways in which social and structural inequalities position certain groups with more or less power, and being committed to pedagogies which identify sites of injustice, critique them and aim to transform them. Just as the broad concept of curriculum and the way it is experienced by students should be a subject of critique, so too should national and local enactments of curriculum; in Scotland, this would relate to CfE and to how the curriculum is understood and implemented at local authority and school levels. With the Scottish Government's recent call for an LGBTI inclusive curriculum, an exploration of what such a curriculum might look like and how it might be enacted and experienced by

children and young people is important in terms of developing professional knowledge and action at this important time in Scottish educational history. Critical literacy theory shows us the power of critical literacy for social justice, using a problem-posing, dialogic pedagogical approach that uses a range of texts to stimulate questions and discussion, in an environment that positions young people as active agents in their own learning. We will now explore educational policy in Scotland, with a critical discussion of literacy policy, before considering the wider literature on LGBTI practices in schools elsewhere.

Scottish education: the policy context

CfE is the national framework for the education of children and young people aged 3-18 in Scotland, and head teachers have overall responsibility for the implementation of the curriculum in their schools (OECD, 2015). Guidance and resources to support teachers in implementing the curriculum are provided by the governmental body Education Scotland and, in some cases, by charitable organisations providing specialist guidance. LGBT Youth Scotland, a national charity for LGBTI youth, has produced guidance to support the implementation of an LGBTI-inclusive curriculum (LGBT Youth Scotland, 2018a). CfE aims to develop four key capacities in all children and young people: successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. The curriculum is organised around eight curricular areas, with literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing identified as core areas for which all teachers have responsibility in developing. As previously stated, teachers in Scotland have considerable autonomy in deciding what and how to teach, since the CfE is intended to be less prescriptive than previous curricula; in a report on the implementation of CfE, the OECD recognised this as “an ambitious and important departure” (2015: 37). This freedom to enact the curriculum according to the values, principles and theoretical

beliefs teachers hold can be seen as a positive force in terms of developing teacher agency, but interpreting the curriculum can be problematic when there is too little structure or theoretical framing, as is the case with CfE which has been criticised for its deliberately “ahistorical and atheoretical design” (Priestley and Humes, 2010: 358). As critical educators we applaud the statement in the *CfE: Literacy Across Learning Principles and Practice* policy document that “the important skills of critical literacy” are of central importance (Scottish Government, 2009: 1), as our overarching position is that critical literacy is an important stance for social justice. As we have discussed elsewhere, (Farrar and Stone, 2019), however, close examination of the curriculum reveals that there is no clear articulation of what critical literacy means. Critical literacy seems to be defined as follows:

Children and young people not only need to be able to read for information: they also need to be able to work out what trust they should place on the information and to identify when and how people are aiming to persuade or influence them (Scottish Government, 2009: 2).

The *Principles and Practice* document does not draw on any academic literature and is thus devoid of any theoretical underpinnings, which can be seen to neutralise the transformative aims of literacy practices that seek to identify and interrogate structures and systems of power in language and social practices (McLaren, 2016). In our view, critical literacy pedagogies are well-suited to advancing an LGBTI inclusive curriculum because they are used to uncover and disrupt the ways language and social practices establish and maintain power for some over others, including LGBTI people. It is

therefore essential that social justice aims are clearly articulated in policy and understood by educators as central to efforts to enact a more just curriculum.

The overarching legislative framework in Scotland, the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 (Scottish Government, 2014a), enshrines the principles of Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) in law (Scottish Government, 2012). GIRFEC's wellbeing indicators identify the need for each child to be: safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, responsible, respected and included. Inclusion for LGBTI children and young people has been the focus of the LGBTI Inclusive Education Working Group, which recently submitted a report including recommendations to Scottish Ministers; the Scottish Government has accepted all of these recommendations. The working group has recommended that national guidance on expectations for LGBTI inclusive education is produced, and that the statutory guidance *Conduct of Relationships, Sexual Health, and Parenthood Education in Schools (RSHP)* (2014) is updated to use a "thematic outcomes" based approach including:

- a. Understanding LGBTI terminology and identities;
- b. Representations of LGBTI people and their relationships in ways which seek to deliver understanding and equality;
- c. Recognising and understanding homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia within school and their impact on wider society;
- d. Tackling homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia within school and their impact on wider society;
- e. Understanding prejudice in relation to the LGBTI community and an awareness of the history of LGBTI equalities movements; and,

f. An understanding of respect, privacy and consent (Scottish Government, 2018: 9).

We would argue that a critical literacy stance could be adopted by teachers as a framework to implement these thematic approaches, to move beyond naming and identifying terminology towards critically-informed discussions about current and historical representations of LGBTI people in the news media as well as in film and fiction, including how lack of representation leads to marginalisation and exclusion. From a critical literacy perspective, addressing homophobia, biphobia and transphobia within schools leads to awareness and understanding of injustices that can be developed through the use of real-life narratives and statistics, as discussed below. Situating inequalities and real-world problems in local contexts is at the heart of critical literacy (Freire, 1970), and supports learning and teaching that is not tokenistic, but transformative.

Experiences of LGBTI youth in Scotland

Nicola Sturgeon has stated that Blair Wilson demonstrated the “dignity, courage and compassion” that should define Scotland as a nation (Sturgeon, 2018). Recent research has highlighted discrimination, bullying and violence reported by LGBTI young people in Scotland in the UK more widely. For example, in a recent study by LGBT Youth Scotland (2018b), 52% of respondents identified school or education as the context in which they experienced the highest level of discrimination. Almost three quarters (71%) of LGBT youth surveyed experienced bullying at school, and almost half (46%) rated their school experience as “bad”; this figure rose to 53% for transgender young people. In light of wider findings that the percentage of LGBTI youth agreeing that Scotland is a good place to live has increased sharply over the last decade (from 57% in 2007 to

81% in 2017), these statistics demonstrate that schools are common sites of injustice for LGBTI youth. Of the young people surveyed, 84% of LGBTI young people and 96% of transgender young people had experienced mental health issues, with half of LGBTI young people and 63% of transgender young people experiencing suicidal thoughts or behaviours. These statistics foreground the importance of addressing inequality and discrimination related to LGBTI issues, particularly within school settings, which LGBTI youth identify as highly problematic, to improve mental health and wellbeing in the LGBTI population.

Looking critically at the survey findings, there is a strong disconnect between the government's national outcomes, namely that children and young people "grow up loved, safe and respected" (Scottish Government, 2012) and live free from discrimination (Scottish Government, 2019), and the real-life experiences of young people, mainly in schools. There is, therefore, an urgent need from a policy standpoint to address and redress these issues and, we argue, that critical literacy affords teachers opportunities to create spaces to discuss these injustices and how we might collectively transform them. From a pedagogical perspective, Freire's concept of curiosity can be fostered and developed by introducing information such as the findings of the 2018 LGBT Youth study to students, and creating opportunities for questioning and discussion about why schools have been identified as sites of significant injustices for certain groups, as well as how we might act together to improve school experiences for those who experience bullying, marginalisation and harm. Despite this policy stance, not much literature exists within the Scottish context, hence we turn to examples from the international literature to explore how educators outside of Scotland have problematised social structures and language practices; used children's literature to teach LGBTI issues; and enacted critical literacy across curricular areas.

Problematising dominant social structures and language practices

One of the themes identified in the literature on developing LGBTI-inclusive curricula in schools is the problematisation of language and social practices that operate to marginalise and discriminate against certain groups. A critical perspective on constructions of gender and sexuality foregrounds how heteronormativity, or the dominance of heterosexuality, positions non-heterosexual representations and relationships as ‘other’ to the norm. Problematising binary positions, in which opposites are constructed by establishing the dominance of a group and thereby reducing opportunities for the other position, is central to critical literacy, which makes power imbalances visible (Stone, 2017). Butler highlights the ways in which bullying operates in situations in which “sexuality is regulated through the policing and shaming of gender” (1993: 27); in schools this can happen through direct interactions between children and young people; between school staff and students; and through unexplored, unchallenged discriminatory language and social practices. According to Snapp et al, heteronormativity or heterosexist bias “normalizes heterosexuality and stigmatizes LGBTQ people” (Snapp et al 2015: 250).

Page (2017b: 358) acknowledges that many teachers are “fearful of engaging” with LGBTI issues in their teaching as well as “providing curriculum that represents sexual minority students”, an issue that is identified also by Hendrix-Soto and Mosley Wetzel (2019). Similarly, Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan argue that educators “need to share the ways we’ve worked to make all kinds of kids who have marginalized identity labels feel welcome in classrooms” (2013: 227). Ryan (2016) explores the use of heteronormative actions and language in one American second-grade class, specifically

one boy's use of the expression "You may kiss the bride" whilst pushing two opposite-sex children's heads together, and using a gay slur when doing the same action with same-sex children. Ryan's ethnographic research in different elementary schools reveals how children construct their understandings of sexuality (and maintain the dominance of heterosexuality) through their language use and interactions in the classroom and in unofficial learning spaces such as toilets, playgrounds, and dining spaces. She argues that "protecting" children from learning about sexuality by prohibiting discussions in the classroom effectively eliminates opportunities for critical exploration of terminology, social constructs, and how language and actions can include or exclude certain groups. This aligns with a critical literacy approach, which advocates actively teaching about issues of power through the use of critical questioning and discussion rather than prohibition or protection through avoidance; as Lee (2019) argues, educators' silence has the power to uphold heteronormativity. As McDaniel points out, sometimes this form of avoidance relates to adult resistance rather than an explicit concern with protection: "Children learn at an early age that certain topics, such as sex or homelessness, are uncomfortable for adults and therefore off limits" (2004: 473).

Page (2017b) describes the work of American high school teacher Ms. Lanza, whose broad philosophy of fairness and equity of opportunity applied to all of her students, and foregrounded issues of power relating to race, class or sexuality. Specifically, she articulated that "Everything's a conversation" (Page, 2017b: 354), that all teaching should be dialogic. Students were encouraged to express their opinions, and were challenged to explain why they felt that way. Her focus on equity and inclusion relating to wider social issues meant that students were open to readings and discussions about gender identity and sexual orientation; in this way learning and teaching about LGBTQ issues was part of wider critical pedagogy, not a "special event" (2017b: 355).

Accepted phraseology or unchallenged terminology – such as a student saying “That’s so gay” – was not simply called out for being unacceptable language; instead Ms. Lanza would ask the student what they were trying to say, then offer up another choice of word (2017b: 356). Ms. Lanza was enacting what we recognise as critical literacy pedagogy, by making it commonplace to read and discuss issues related to LGBT youth in the classroom, and by challenging the unconscious use of language that can lead to marginalisation and alienation of minority groups, including using the word gay as an insult. Demonstrating how commonly-used language can be harmful to certain individuals or groups disrupts its taken-for-granted nature and enables young people to recognise how they are positioned by the use of language and how they position others. Shelton describes how high school teacher Lillian similarly challenged the common use of “That’s so gay” with her students through class discussion, enabling them “to explore the power of language and the impact of derogatory terms” (2015: 122), which might otherwise have gone unchallenged.

As well as using students’ language to expose inequalities, educators need to actively reflect on the language they use and on the ways in which they wield power in their interactions with students, specifically regarding “where the relations of domination and power that derail the social justice possibilities of critical literacy can be made both recognisable and revisable” (Keddie, 2008: 1). A cautionary tale of critical literacy practice in conflict with teachers’ classroom management styles is evidenced in Keddie’s description of Mr. A, who teaches his secondary school students to critically analyse gender and power in texts, but then undermines this with his authoritarian approach that sets up rigid teacher/student power relations. In a similar vein, Wegwert (2014) explores how young people were silenced by social studies teachers and school

administrators who refused their efforts to organise the Day of Silence in their American secondary school, in an example of how undemocratic and non-inclusive attitudes can prevent opportunities to discuss LGBT issues and act as a barrier to critical literacy. Snapp et al (2015) interviewed a student who described the contradictory language and conduct of one teacher in an American high school:

When a history teacher of mine talks about some significant person in history, he will mention if they're gay. But that same teacher also repeatedly complains when students talk about football because it's "homo-erotic," as he likes to say. And he's also called a student "tranny" (Snapp et al 2015: 255).

These examples highlight the importance of taking a consistent critical literacy stance that examines how, as educators, our words and actions (or the hidden curriculum) have the power to shape attitudes, maintain dominant power structures and hierarchies, and further alienate those in marginalised groups. This has the negative effect of working in opposition to teaching and learning about social justice through the formal curriculum.

Page urges us to think "about more than the topics or texts" (2017b: 357) when we use an LGBTI-inclusive curriculum, that critical analysis through discussion is fundamental. She explains: "In schools where students *do* report usage of an inclusive curriculum, LGBT students experience a safer school environment, less absenteeism, a feeling of more connection to their schools, and greater acceptance from their peers" (Page 2017b: 347). By creating spaces to openly discuss how children's use of language in their social interactions can be harmful, and by examining our own conduct and

language use for instances of this, we enable the disruption of heteronormative texts, discussions and ways of acting and speaking, and support the development of an inclusive curriculum (Page 2017b). It is our view that adopting and enacting such an approach will enable educators in Scotland to achieve the Scottish Government's (2019) aims for all children and young people to live free from discrimination and to "grow up loved, safe and respected".

Using children's literature to teach LGBTI issues

Using children's literature to explore LGBTI issues can be a powerful approach in terms of developing understanding, and addressing homophobia and heteronormativity through discussion (Page, 2017a; Blackburn and Clark, 2011).

Page's research with 577 Language Arts teachers in one American state found that the most common means of including LGBTI literature in the classroom was recommending it for reading for enjoyment, or allowing it to be read. Only a few teachers claimed to teach about sexuality and gender explicitly, even though many stated that they were very comfortable about discussing LGBTI issues and using LGBTI texts.

Martino and Cumming-Potvin explore the use of LGBT-themed texts by Janice, a Canadian second-grade teacher, as "a pedagogical resource for interrogating the cultural logics of gendered and sexual normativities" (2016: 808). Janice created a library in her classroom of LGBTI books for children and colleagues to borrow and read during quiet reading time including one which children "just loved" (2016: 822), entitled *William's Doll* (Zolotow, 1972). Janice explained that some boys responded to the book by having discussions with their parents about wanting to play with their sisters' dolls, sometimes resulting in parental surveillance and resistance, reported to her

by the children. Similarly, some parents refused to let their sons wear pink clothing for the Day of Pink, which promotes anti-homophobic actions and originated when two high school students in Nova Scotia, Canada, witnessed a gay peer being bullied for wearing a pink shirt and subsequently organised a campaign of solidarity, in which everyone in the school arrived wearing pink shirts. In the run-up to the Day of Pink, Janice used *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2009), *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert, 2009) and *What's a Penguin to Think When He Wakes Up Pink* (Rickards, 2008) with her class to discuss the broader issues around bullying. She also showed a clip of a television interview with *My Princess Boy* author Cheryl Kilodavis and her son “to explicitly address questions of gender non-conformity and trans identification” (2016: 820). Janice used drama activities to create opportunities for children to explore scenarios such as having a new boy in their class who wears pink shoes or a dress, and how they might respond or react.

Using a critical literacy approach, Janice encouraged children to think about why people tend to have stronger reactions to boys wearing what is perceived as clothing suitable for girls, and not to girls or women who wear trousers and have short hair styles. Reading texts like *William's Doll* and discussing gendered-appropriateness of toys similarly encourages children to engage with questions of how these social “rules” are established and maintained had a transformative effect in terms of children raising the issues for discussion at home and challenging parental perspectives. As Sandretto argues:

It is important to note that heteronormativity is pervasive, and maintains its ascendant position through the taken-for-granted repetition of norms in multiple

texts. Given the persistent nature of heteronormativity, teachers and students will need regular opportunities to critically analyse gender and sexuality norms across a range of texts and contexts (2018: 208).

Critical literacy and LGBTI issues across the curriculum

Making LGBTI issues visible across secondary subjects and discussing issues of gender and sexuality openly had a positive effect on the experiences and perceptions of high school students in California, in Snapp et al's study (2015). One student expressed the view that learning about LGBTI issues helped prevent bullying or might prevent it, as "people in my class became more aware of things... were simply more educated afterwards, and had a little bit of an easier time talking about LGBTQ issues. [It] opened up debate of how people view the world" (Snapp et al 2015: 257).

Another student identified that the inclusive curriculum gave LGBTI students:

a place to talk about things they might otherwise avoid talking about. What had the greatest effect was the history videos. Seeing that LGBTQ people have been present and fighting for rights and visibility as long as any other group helped my classmates accept and understand them (ibid).

Opening up spaces for critical discussions about LGBTI issues develops all young people's knowledge and understanding and broadens their perspectives about how people see or read the world (Freire and Macedo, 1987). Pedagogies that make LGBTI issues visible make the lives of LGBTI young people visible, thereby

transforming their experiences and suggesting that an LGBTI-inclusive curriculum “has the potential to promote agency and change” (Snapp et al 2015: 254). Guidance published for Scottish teachers by the charitable organisation LGBT Youth Scotland aims to address the issue of lack of representation of LGBT identities in Scottish classrooms by providing suggestions about “how to include LGBT voices and identities in the classroom” (2018a: 3). These cross-curricular suggestions include teaching about LGBT religious leaders, and exploring gender stereotypes and gender expectations in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) subjects. Although the guidance does not refer to critical literacy directly, it is clear that many of the suggestions involve key aspects such as challenge and critique of taken-for-granted practices and beliefs, with the aim of transforming attitudes and assumptions. Similarly, Time for Inclusive Education (TIE) has published educational resources, on LGBT icons and key moments in history for secondary school students and on discrimination for primary-aged children (TIE, 2020) and Stonewall Scotland has published *An Introduction to Supporting LGBT Children and Young People: A guide for schools, colleges and settings* (2020). These resources are freely available, and accessible for all educators developing an LGBTI inclusive curriculum.

Discussion

This paper has argued for the use of critical literacy as a meaningful framework within which LGBTI issues can be taught in Scottish schools, following the Scottish Government’s announcement that LGBTI education will be embedded in all state schools. Critical literacy is concerned with issues of power, and also with how certain groups establish and maintain power at the expense of others, leading to marginalisation and injustice. Recent statistics show evidence of prejudice and hate crimes perpetrated

against LGBTI people in Scotland – including, worryingly, a high instance in Scottish schools. Critical literacy is both a framework for understanding how certain groups experience injustices by others, and one in which discussions about these injustices can be held openly, making visible these experiences and providing legitimised spaces for learning and teaching (Page 2017b; McLaren, 2016). Although the wider academic literature exploring LGBTI learning and teaching in schools is limited, it does provide valuable insights into what is being done in schools elsewhere, and what is possible for Scotland and in other places developing LGBTI inclusive curricula. We have highlighted some of the literature that explores practices in primary and secondary schools, which draws explicit attention to how the actions of students and their teachers both establish and maintain the heteronormative social construction as dominant, serving to marginalise or “other” divergent positions. Critical literacy urges us to challenge these constructions when they work to disempower certain groups (Freire, 1970; Vasquez et al., 2019).

The seeming reluctance or even refusal of the majority of teachers to discuss sexualised language and social practices, such as those enacted in an early years classroom in Ryan’s (2016) study, and in Hendrix-Soto and Mosley Wetzel’s review (2019), further maintains the dominant heteronormative constructions. We argue that prohibiting or avoiding discussions with children about the sexualised language they use in the classroom and the playground is often due to adults’ discomfort, when instead this should be seen within a critical framework of how harmful and marginalising language and action need to be made visible in order to discuss how it can work to “other” certain groups. We have seen, through the work of primary teacher Janice (Martino and Cumming-Potvin, 2016), how this can be done meaningfully with young

children, causing them to look at their wider family lives to challenge restrictive practices – such as why boys should not play with dolls. Paechter (2015) describes young children’s play as commonly containing elements related to gender and sexuality, and argues that educators must actively include these language practices in their teaching, not avoid or resist them. We argue that young children are naturally critical, challenging what they see as unjust in their immediate and wider experiences (Stone, 2017; Vasquez, 2010) and critical literacy capitalises on the critical impulses children naturally have. Opening up spaces for candid discussions about the language casually and perhaps uncritically used by teenagers is also important, as Ms. Lanza shows us in her challenge of common, problematic phrases such as “That is so gay” (Page, 2017b). We argue that identifying how language and social practices work to exclude or marginalise certain groups is fundamental in a critical pedagogy of respect, that draws attention to the sometimes unconscious – but no less harmful – ways our words and actions can hurt. Considering relationships and families through a critical literacy lens builds awareness and understanding and, in our experience, respect for a range of possibilities of being and living beyond the dominant norm (heteronormativity). The actions taken by the teachers discussed in this paper are transformative in that they introduce new ways of thinking and being, and challenge taken-for-granted practices; often, as we can see with Janice’s pupils - who take action to challenge assumptions and practices in their homes - children become agents of change through their experience with critical literacy.

Literature and historical accounts provide opportunities to discover and explore the lives of others – real and fictional – in the LGBTI community, and thus provide insights into experiences. Representation of LGBTI characters and individuals in fiction

and non-fiction texts is restricted (Page, 2017a), as is access to texts with LGBTI characters in schools and libraries, as Page's study based in the United States makes plain. Snapp et al (2015) present cases demonstrating how significant it can be for LGBTI young people to have opportunities to learn about prominent members of the community in their classroom studies, across curricular areas. In Scotland, the media representation of Blair Wilson's selfie in response to a homophobic attack affords pedagogical opportunities to open up spaces to discuss LGBTI issues. In 'hosting difficult conversations in the classroom', as Miller explains the pedagogical approach of using texts to stimulate discussion about social justice issues, it is possible that we might 'find ourselves on the doorstep of fear: fear of the conflict that often ensues when divergent truths meet' (2012: 33).

Representation through teaching is important, but it must not be superficial or tokenistic, without self-reflection on one's words and actions. How the hidden curriculum (McLaren, 2016) works to contradict teaching about LGBTI issues can be seen in some cautionary tales in the literature. For example, Snapp et al (2015) present one young person's account of a history teacher who uses disparaging and harmful terminology to describe LGBTI people, and Keddie describes Mr. A, who teaches about social justice but at the same time conducts himself in a stereotypically 'macho' way (Keddie, 2008). Such words and actions undermine not just the enactment of critical literacy, but crucially also the fundamental endeavor to establish respectful interactions between students and teachers, and between the themes being taught and the ways in which they are taught. As educators, this shows us the importance of taking reflexive action, to consider how our conduct and interactions with students cannot be separated from a critical pedagogical approach.

Snapp et al argue that being attuned to imbalances of power that disadvantage some groups is important for teachers and for students:

An inclusive and culturally relevant approach to teaching not only helps to reduce discrimination against marginalized populations (including women, people of color, and people with disabilities), but also creates more equitable education for young people (2015: 250).

At the same time as we argue for a critical literacy stance to enable the development of an LGBTI inclusive curriculum, we recognise the many challenges this poses for teachers apart from those we have already discussed, such as taking a theoretically-informed pedagogical approach within a curricular framework that does not do so (Farrar and Stone, 2019), and finding evidence of how educators elsewhere have achieved this. Challenging language practices such as the derogatory use of the word gay (Page, 2017b and Shelton, 2015) because it equates one's sexual identity with negative connotations is important in a critical literacy approach; however, as well as providing an example of how Lillian effectively challenged this practice with one group of students, Shelton explains that with another class she faced a significant barrier when one student argued that being gay *is* negative, and so she believed her use of the phrase was correct because she meant it to be an insult. This barrier, coming into conflict with the personal ideologies of students and educators, is identified in the review conducted by Hendrix-Soto and Mosely Wetzel (2019). Secondly, being reflexive about the power we have as educators in positions of authority is not straightforward, and it is significant that the examples used in this paper – of Mr. A (Keddie, 2008) and the teacher

identified by a student as acting as an ally to the LGBTI community whilst using derogatory language (Snapp et al., 2015) – were not self-reflective accounts, suggesting that it can be difficult to identify our own acts of marginalisation and exclusion. Finally, we promote using a range of texts and especially children’s literature to support students’ understandings of social justice issues, in alignment with Their’s view that this helps ‘students become aware of the perspectives of others and better understand their own lived experience’ (2013: 179). Yet we are aware that although many educators – including English and language arts teachers - state that they take an anti-homophobic and anti-heteronormative stance, in practice they can be reluctant and even resistant to using LGBTI texts (*ibid.*). One possible way to overcome these challenges is through professional development about teaching LGBTI issues and critically-informed professional dialogue, in which educators have time to discuss implications for their practice (DePalma and Atkinson, 2009). Through this, educators are able to pose questions and raise issues from their practice with colleagues, working towards the questioning, curious stance Freire advocates, in which we reflect on our social and language practices and structures – including our own teaching environments – through ‘the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other’ (1970: 53).

This paper was written in response to the Scottish Government’s announcement that state schools will implement LGBTI inclusive curricula, to present our vision of critical literacy as a meaningful framework within which teachers can actively strive to make this happen for Scotland’s children and young people. We have aimed to demonstrate that critical literacy is theoretically and practically aligned with this endeavour in terms of making power imbalances visible; providing spaces to discuss

and explore how these inequalities arise and are maintained; and can lead to small but significant steps towards a more inclusive and equitable society. Critical literacy puts children and young people at the heart of this change.

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