Human Rights Education Review

Examining Relationships and Sex Education through a child rights lens: an intersectional approach

Francesca Zanatta

University of East London, United Kingdom.

Abstract: Inspired by Audrey Osler's call for the development of novel approaches to intersectionality in human rights education praxis, this article presents an undergraduate module on Children's Rights, examining processes of teaching and learning about rights through the topic of Relationships and Sex Education (RSE). The module, designed for future educators, intersects elements of children's rights education with the theoretical positions of queer studies and critical pedagogy. Drawing on data from two focus groups, consisting of students following the programme, the author analyses students' views and attitudes to RSE, using Foucault's overarching concept of problematisation and the concept of sites of struggle. Data analysis reveals tensions and potential clashes between the students' professional selves, their personal values, and elements of the theoretical framework adopted in the course. These tensions are nevertheless constructive, highlighting the potential of children's rights education to contribute to transformative human development.

Francesca Zanatta: F.Zanatta@uel.ac.uk

Examining Relationships and Sex Education through a child rights lens: an intersectional approach

Francesca Zanatta
F.Zanatta@uel.ac.uk

University of East London, United Kingdom.

Abstract: Inspired by Audrey Osler's call for the development of novel approaches to intersectionality in human rights education praxis, this article presents an undergraduate module on Children's Rights, examining processes of teaching and learning about rights through the topic of Relationships and Sex Education (RSE). The module, designed for future educators, intersects elements of children's rights education with the theoretical positions of queer studies and critical pedagogy. Drawing on data from two focus groups, consisting of students following the programme, the author analyses students' views and attitudes to RSE, using Foucault's overarching concept of problematisation and the concept of sites of struggle. Data analysis reveals tensions and potential clashes between the students' professional selves, their personal values, and elements of the theoretical framework adopted in the course. These tensions are nevertheless constructive, highlighting the potential of children's rights education to contribute to transformative human development.

Introduction

At In April 2019, the Department for Education, responsible for early years to secondary education services in England, published a set of guidelines outlining new policy requirements for the content and delivery of Relationships and Sex Education (RSE). The publication highlighted the two most notable changes being applied to the prior requirements for the delivery of 'Sex and Relationships Education' (SRE): the shift in the name, and the extension of compulsory relationship education to primary schools.

The announcement was received with very mixed responses from parents, the wider community and educators (Allen-Kinross, 2019; Johnston, 2019), confirming the historical status of RSE as one of the most controversial school subjects, one that has been a great concern to teachers (Wolley, 2011). The subject has aroused great controversy in both the policy-making and public spheres, and this has limited opportunities for constructive conversations and knowledge exchanges between policy makers, educators, parents and children (Alldred & David, 2007).

The results of the 2019 consultation conducted by the National Education Union (NEU) and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children

(NSPCC) showed that half of the teachers participating shared a lack of confidence in their readiness to deliver the new compulsory subject. The consultation also reported on the top priorities identified by educators to ensure a confident delivery of RSE. Training and clear guidance for teachers and information for parents emerged as the most important (NSPCC NEU, 2019).

Research has evidenced that placing the sole responsibility for the development and incorporation of RSE on individuals in schools, without specific requirements or guidance for implementation, leads to disparities in quality and access (Nelson, Odberg & Emmelin, 2019). The inconsistencies are, however, influenced by many other factors, beyond policy and guidance. Above all, RSE has an evolving and dynamic nature, one shaped by socio-historical and cultural factors and this is also outlined in a 2016 policy brief, published by the European Expert Group on Sexuality Education (2016) in the journal 'Sex Education'. As such, the curriculum and delivery of RSE tends to be shaped by the moral panics and political agendas of the time (Ezer, Jones, Fisher & Power, 2019). Social, cultural and moral discourses impact directly not only the content, delivery and implementation, but also educators' attitudes and beliefs.

Children's Rights Education is a pedagogical approach that promotes a shift in discourses of childhood. It recognises children as active agents in society (Wyness, 2015), and centres rights at the heart of work and interactions with children (Tibbitts, 2017). Mindful of the role that discourses of childhood play in shaping pedagogies and strategies for RSE in educators and practitioners (Jones, 2014; Robinson, 2012), CRE is here proposed as a unique opportunity for exploring attitudes and beliefs on RSE with future educators (Tibbitts, 2017). This article explores the experiences of undergraduate students engaged in a Children's Rights Module, delivered as part of a BA in Early Childhood & Education. The module adopts CRE as a framework to unpack attitudes and beliefs towards RSE, through the intersection of CRE, queer theory (Bersani, 1995; Edelman, 2004) and critical pedagogy (hooks, 1994; Kincheloe, 2008). The study considers how engagement with children's rights education might support students in approaching the subject of RSE through rights-respecting and anti-oppressive practice. Specifically, it analyses the sites of struggle impacting the disposition of students, as future educators, to navigate and negotiate knowledge, power dynamics and identities. Through engagement with existing literature and materials, we contextualise the status of RSE, and provide a brief overview of research on educators' perspectives and experiences of RSE. We then introduce the context of the investigation; the Children's Rights undergraduate module within an Early Childhood and Education programme. This module uses Children's Rights as a framework for the exploration of RSE. The data, collected through two focus groups, will then be presented through a process of problematisation (Foucault, 1988), a tool for critical analysis of the experiences and reflections of undergraduate students. The findings will outline some of the sites of struggle experienced by students as future educators, and the role of Children's Rights Education (CRE) in creating opportunities to engage with RSE through agency-rights (Liebel, 2012).

Relationships and Sex Education through Politics

At the heart of most public discourses on RSE is a perennial binary preoccupation on whether it should or should not be included as compulsory teaching in educational curriculums. In England, RSE sits outside of the National Curriculum; this means its knowledge is not tested, nor is its content regulated. Its status as 'non-subject' remains unvaried, even in the new policy guidance (Department for Education, 2019a).

The political nature of RSE is enshrined in its very nature as a non-neutral subject and in its topics: sex, sexuality, identity, social identities, relations, dynamics, power and consent (Epstein & Johnson, 1998). These components are social constructs (Foucault; 1988) within a specific context, the dynamic set of circumstances and factors in which a discourse develops and exists. It is within this political context that RSE is faced with binaries linked to morality and ideology (Roodsaz, 2018). Undeniably, the focus of RSE is susceptible to its close links to political discourses of power (Zimmerman, 2015).

Literature has identified historical discourses of morality that gravitate around purity, social hygiene, and (hetero)normativity (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Selman, 2003). Analysis of policies has also identified political agendas on matters such as individual responsibility (associated with neoliberal politics), nationalism and preservation of social structures and hierarchies of power (Ball, 2013).

The two most prominent examples of these tendencies in England are the introduction of Section 28 (1988- 2003) and the subsequent publication of the Equality Act (2010). The ideology of Section 28, the infamous policy which set the prohibition on promoting homosexuality by teaching or by publishing material in schools, is arguably still present and embedded within the educational policies of the early 2000s. The rising conservatism in the political context has since shaped the British educational system (Jones, 2014) on three levels. Firstly, conservativism has led to a rising datafication of education (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017) and the prioritising of performance-driven systems (Jarke & Breiter, 2019). These shifts have limited the knowledge formation of educators and their capacity for teaching outside the realm of educational performance, such as RSE. Secondly, conservative policies have brought about changes in the formation of educators, promoting an emphasis on practice over theoretical formation (Jones, 2014) and the de-professionalisation of practitioners and educators (Osgood, 2010). Lastly, through an action of 'muscular liberalism' (Latour, 2012), the role of teachers has shifted towards that of promoters and guardians of national identity and Britishness.

Relationships and Sex Education through Education

Political and social attitudes and RSE guidance have been identified as key factors in promoting a proactive teacher engagement with RSE (Vega, Glynn & van Pelt, 2012). For example, educators reported positive experiences in utilising the Equality Act 2010 as a legal framework to support their work towards inclusive education (Carlile, 2019). However, the controversial nature and low status of RSE have led to a gap in the provision of in-depth guidance and support. As a result, teaching RSE can be an 'emotionally charged' (p. 11) and complex experience for educators (van Leent & Ryan, 2015). In a study comparing practices of development and deployment of RSE in the Netherlands and in England, Lewis and Knijn (2002) argue that the 'adversarial nature' (p. 126) of attitudes towards RSE in England has historically led

to mixed approaches in its delivery, both in terms of content and quality. Teachers' curricular choices are impacted not solely by personal beliefs and views, but also by anxiety and fear of repercussions in terms of job security (Dickson, Parshall, & Brindis, 2019) and their positioning and role within the wider community (Darroch, Landry & Singh, 2000).

Conversely, Wilder (2018) explores how strong school leadership with a confident knowledge of RSE can be a core tool for the enhancement of teaching and learning practices. Wilder's findings (2018) corroborate suggestions (Alldred & David, 2007) that educators need to feel comfortable enough to teach RSE. This is consistent with other international studies which have identified the beliefs and attitudes of RSE educators as crucial factors in its delivery (Astuti, Sugiyatno & Aminah, 2017; DePalma & Francis, 2014; Iyer & Aggleton, 2013; Martin,Riazi, Firoozi, & Nasiri, 2020). In alignment with Wilder's suggestions (2018), research shows that educators' knowledge and attitudes towards the topics presented through RSE seldom appear to be shaped by research and evidence; they are rather based on personal experiences, societal views and beliefs, and access to support and guidance (Carlile, 2019; da Silva, Guerra & Sperling 2013; DePalma & Francis, 2014).

Decades of research have focused on developing new and radical projects to deliver RSE in schools (Renold & McGeeney, 2017). Yet, gaps remain, both in practice and policy. The new English policy (Department for Education, 2019b) leaves many gaps in relation to the support and guidance provided to educators and schools alike. Poignantly, the policy makes no mention of changes in the training of prospective educators, and the responsibility to develop meaningful and effective educational pathways for school staff remains with individual school leaders and educators. This issue has already been highlighted by Atkinson (2002), in relation to the previous policy. At present, not even Sweden, the first country to make RSE compulsory, has clear requirements for the inclusion of RSE training in initial teacher education. The lack of clear and formal requirements for RSE in teacher training is reflected in the anxiety and sense of not being prepared shared by many teachers, as studies over the years have revealed (DePalma & Francis, 2014; Wilder, 2018).

The call for specific and dedicated educator training seems to be a central issue, although it is important to remember Ullman's (2017) admonishments that this would only constitute an initial intervention and would not suffice in fully changing the overall discourses and experiences of teachers and students. The argument presented in this article is that Children's Rights Education could play a fundamental role in the formation of discourses of childhood(s) for educators, and therefore in their approaches to teaching and learning RSE.

The context of study: Relationships and Sex Education through a Children's Rights module

The module, here discussed as the setting for the investigation, is a Children's Rights module in an undergraduate programme in Early Childhood & Education (Zanatta, forthcoming). Whilst I have led the design and delivery of this module for five academic years, this project was limited to the experiences of one specific term of a year of teaching. This is because, during the term studied, the focus of the module was specifically on the analysis of RSE through a children's rights lens, in response to the release of the new RSE policy in England (Department for Education, 2019a).

The pedagogical approach I adopt in this module is grounded in the disciplines of critical psychology (Burman, 2008), the sociology of childhood (Mayall,

2006), and critical pedagogy (hooks, 1994). This pedagogical model is discussed in depth in other publications (Zanatta & Long, 2021; Zanatta, forthcoming). The aim of the pedagogy is to encourage students to apply children's rights frameworks and theories on contemporary issues that impact children's agency in education and in the wider society (James & Prout, 1997). During the module, students are encouraged to practice 'staying with the trouble' (Haraway, 2016) to explore, unpack and reflect upon their own beliefs and practices, recognising and working within the dilemmas emerging from their personal, professional and scholarly engagement with children's rights. In the term studied in this research, the module focused on the application of children's rights theories and frameworks to the responses and challenges posed by the changes to the RSE curriculum and delivery in England, as evidenced by the mixed reception to the new 2019 policy (Allen-Kinross, 2019; Johnston, 2019).

In this context, the module incorporated elements of queer theory and critical pedagogy. Aspects of queer theory (Bersani, 1995; Edelman, 2004) were specifically introduced in the unpacking and questioning of traditional constructs of 'childhood', as presented in developmental psychology. The rationale for using queer theory is that it promotes a further layer of analysis of concepts of normativity. This opens the possibility for dialogue and for the reimagining of not only the roles of the individual, but also of the social (Martino & Cumming-Potvin; 2016). This in turn develops the possibility for intersectionality in rights education praxis (Osler, 2016).

The teaching and learning is also informed by principles of critical pedagogy, specifically the centrality of dialogue and the continuous requirement for reflective analysis of the self and its engagement with others and the content of teaching and learning (McLaren, 2003). The rationale for the engagement with critical pedagogy is to extend the destabilisation of structural, cultural and power norms, a process promoted by queer theory (Kincheloe, 2008). Invited to step outside the circle of conformity and neutrality, students are encouraged to reflect critically both on their own experiences (hooks, 2004) and on behaviours, attitudes and beliefs acquired and transmitted through prior studies, practices and experiences (Steinberg, 2012).

Methods

The research is situated in the context of the teaching and learning in the Children's Rights module that was briefly introduced in the previous section. Students were approached during the module, after ethical clearance had been obtained from the university. To maintain students' anonymity, no personal characteristics will be disclosed. The data collection started after the completion of the term in which the students engaged with the topics explored in the study, once they had received grades for their assessments. The methodological approach employed is informed by narrative inquiry, which enables a 'retrospective meaning making' (Chase, 2005, p. 656) in which narratives are incorporated with thoughts and interpretation. Students' narratives were collected from two focus groups, of three and five participants respectively. The number of participants and opportunities for collaborative discussions were limited by the global COVID-19 pandemic, which suddenly interrupted face-to-face teaching during the second term of the academic year. The first focus group was person-to-person, whilst the second was online. Each focus group was recorded and transcribed for analysis. To promote the focus on narrative data, the groups were conducted as dialogues in which students were invited to present their learning journeys. There was a specific focus on reflecting on elements of the experience they recognised as challenging in approaching RSE from

a children's rights perspective. Data was then analysed and interpreted alongside reflective notes I collated during my teaching in the module (in this term), mindful of my role as participant in the discursive site of struggle (Britzman, 2012) of the interactions and stories shared by students.

I adopted framework analysis to organise and code the data. In this context, the conceptual framework is intended as the analysis of 'a network, or 'a plane', of interlinked concepts that together provide a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon or phenomena' (Jabareen, 2009, p. 51). A conceptual framework of problematisation enables the exploration of how and why certain things become a 'problem' (Foucault, 1988). In discussing the process of problematisation, through the analysis of the technologies of the self, Foucault (1988) refers to relations as a core element of his thinking. The technologies of the self are then summarised as a matter of relations between knowledge, power, and the self. This framework is suitable, as it develops in relation to the study of 'the rules, duties, and prohibitions of sexuality' (Foucault, 1988). Informed by the work of Britzman (2012), problematisation is used as a tool for the recognition of curriculum-based research as a complex site, where narratives and experiences mix with discourse analysis and theory. Specifically, problematisation offers the opportunity to acknowledge what Foucault (1988) classifies as the four categories of technology, interconnected structures, and realities that enable the production and modification of the human experience. For the purpose of this investigation, I will focus the analysis on the application of three of the four technologies: technologies of knowledge, understood here as the elements shaping meaning-making; technologies of power, the regimes of practice and power framing the issue in context; and, finally, technologies of the self, within which students navigate their roles as learners, professionals and activists and I negotiate those of educator, researcher and activist.

It is in this multiplicity of roles that I find the space and opportunity to reflect on my teaching practices and my positionality as researcher. In these roles, I frequently question whether the liminal space, from where I act, leans towards anti-oppressive commitment or towards a more explicit political agenda. Experimentation and dialogue with students helped to develop an environment where I did not fear lack of neutrality and where students seemed to become more vocal in expressing their thinking. For example, one day I decided to wear to class a t-shirt with the slogan 'support trans kids', a political statement in current times of growing transphobia in the UK (Lewis, 2019, Ferber, 2020). I noted in my reflections an unusual sense of fear, an anxiety that I was imposing my views on students. Of course, supporting trans children is a political act, but one that is grounded in anti-oppressive practice and human rights. My role as teacher, researcher and activist in the project adds a welcome complexity to the study.

Findings: problematising the learning experiences
Technologies of knowledge
Knowledge constitutes a crucial element of the children's rights approach (Covell & Howe, 1999). In line with the teachings of critical pedagogy, with the view to co-construct knowledge, students' existing expertise is incorporated and unpacked as part of the learning journey. At the beginning of the module, students were invited to contribute to our shared wall of knowledge, a visual representation focused on the concepts framing and informing their existing understanding of ontologies and experiences of childhood(s). Throughout their learning journeys, we frequently

returned to this wall to review and unpack concepts through a children's rights perspective. Whilst most students were familiar and knowledgeable about core topics such as the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, childhood as social construct and children's agency, the application of such concepts in practice developed as the first site of struggle. This was discussed by two participants:

> I started with the focus on the innocent child, now I think about the knowing child and what this means in different contexts. But what does this mean when I work with a child?

> I think I am OK with child rights but what this means in schools and in the teaching?

Empirical rights-framed research was also often discussed by students as a reliable tool to unpack complex thinking and apply it to practice. Hearing the voices of children through the findings of the empirical studies seemed to have an impact on students' perspectives:

> I can see I used to think that childhood is innocence but from reading the research of Robinson and Davies I have found out that children are not that naïve and started thinking 'OK then, what else they know?'

Alongside empirical research, the use of real testimonies and examples of children exercising rights was also impactful, perhaps as offering the possibility to experience 'childhood' differently (Long, 2019). Another sticky point, as noted by a participant, was identified in questioning the association of childhood with innocence, an insight that came through engaging with elements of queer theory (Edelman, 2004):

> The stickiest point of everything is children's innocence. That's where I keep going back to.

The concept of children's innocence is widely recognised and discussed in children's rights literature, which identifies innocence as problematic and limiting. This topic offers therefore a great opportunity to intersect queer theory with children's rights education. Robinson (2012) applies Foucault's thinking to reframe the reliance on innocence as a form of policing and governing of the child. Robinson (2012) and Burman (2008) identify in developmental psychology a core root for the hegemony of innocence in an ontology of childhood, a point I have discussed in other papers (Zanatta, 2018; Zanatta & Long, 2021). Attempting to unpack innocence through the questioning of psychological theories is complex, however, and generally leads to confusion. As discussed elsewhere (Zanatta & Long, 2021), students have been heavily exposed to developmental psychology, in both their previous studies and their practice with children. A participant discussed the challenges encountered in reviewing developmental psychology through a critical lens:

> The critique of psychological theories when that is a lot of my thinking of childhood. That's confusing – you see? What about what I learned? I was thinking of how we always see children as children, and we want to protect

them by saying 'you are innocent, and I am the adult and I will protect you'. What's wrong with that?

Underpinned by developmental psychology, students' interpretations and understanding of development, mostly in relation to the capacities of children, largely confirmed their views on innocence.

> We should allow children to be children, children are open minded, they only learn discrimination through parents and teachers, etcetera. But also they should only be taught when the child is ready.

A helpful tool for the re-conceptualisation of development through a children's rights framework in CRE has been offered by Peleg (2019), who has argued for and theorised the adoption of a capability approach in establishing development as a right. Here, development is seen as access to freedom, rather than as a future-oriented deficit account of skills. Still, in students' experiences, concepts such as competence and freedom lead to another site of struggle, in the meeting with traditional thinking about childhood:

> Children are not mature enough and might cause dispute in families if the children are taught things like this, I think it is important that they are ready and at right time.

In this site of struggle, critical pedagogy offers a helpful tool, through the destabilisation and the critique of colonial thinking in western-centric practices and theories (Kincheloe, 2008). Just like encountering children's voices through empirical studies, the analysis of racialised agendas in meaning-making of innocence and the consideration of development through other cultural practices and beliefs opens the possibility for dialogue and reconsideration of innocence. Texts such as Montgomery's (2008) anthropological exploration of childhood and Bernstein's (2011) historical account of racialised uses of innocence support a further layer of questioning of established theories.

> Learning about innocence has always confirmed the importance to keep children safe, but also to check why we are doing this. I never knew that innocence was used by racists for that.

> The new sociology of childhood has helped me understand the critique of innocence, I had not thought about the use of race in innocence.

> We should allow children to be children, children are open minded, so that is different from innocent you see? They only learn discrimination through parents and teachers.

The complex and personal nature of RSE (Wolley, 2001) enabled students' discussions to include matters closer to their personal experiences and the realities of RSE. This seemed to open these new possibilities for dialogue and questioning, as also suggested by hooks (1994, p. 148): 'a simple practice like including personal experience may be more constructively challenging than simply changing the

curriculum'. Through dialogue, these openings enabled students to think about the possible applications of a children's rights perspective in practice.

> Where I was a kid there was no discussion of this kinds of situation, the needs were mostly about how you are gonna live together as a family, so more about the social thing. Now they are separating the emotional needs and the sexual needs. You can make it for the children so that they can understand the situation where they are.

Another important opening came with the acknowledgment of the absence of knowledge in adults and with a growing comfort in exploring the trouble experienced because of this gap (Haraway, 2016). In reflecting about their learning journey, most students recognised that 'not knowing' was crucially shaping their thinking.

> Wellbeing has to be understood in the wider sense, it is not just a physical matter. You have all of this you know, not just about being a child and innocent.

> I knew nothing about RSE before and having that knowledge is going to help me in my profession, so that I can provide them with that understanding and knowledge. Through gaining that I can move it forward and pass it on. We learned that knowledge is everything. We need the foundation so we know that this is possible, and it can be done, this is there for the children we are going to be caring for.

The questioning of prior knowledge, particularly adult-centric theories and practices, is the major site of struggle when we engage with children's rights frameworks that may be regarded as unpopular novelties (Woodhead, 1999). In the next part of the exploration of data, the perceived unpopularity of children's rights is brought to the discussion.

Technologies of power
The idea of how power shapes regimes of practice and dynamics featured at times in students' discussions, mostly through notions acquired through another module, on social policy, which had introduced them to a political framing of practice. In the classroom and in the conversations, mentioning politics would often lead to animated discussions. Significantly, this might have influenced the fact that students reflected on matters of politics in the focus groups, as represented in this exchange:

> S1: One thing, the political approach can be a challenge. So one approach says that the government should only focus on the health services and welfare of children. Another says they are supposed to tell what children should learn and be specific and say this and this and this. But this is what I think make things harder for the practitioner, they are the ones working with the children and some policies do not take that into account. Like for example the Fundamental British Values. There is need to differentiate according to the area, and think respectfully about the culture.

S2: Yes, but if it's coming down one line and someone says 'you have to do it this way' then at least you have it and that's it. When you give it out to people, then teachers can choose I don't want to teach this. But everyone has to stick with it. If we say that there is not one standard, then the practitioners could all have so many different ideas and who knows who is right.

S1: I liked the process of consultation that took place in Scotland for the change in policy. That's what children's rights is, no? Again, the needs of each area are different, to have one policy for all is difficult. I think you know that in certain areas teachers face challenges to teach RSE. In some other areas parents are just fine, so how does policy address that? Even the students' behaviour creates a problem and that it upsets the whole system. So yes you need a policy from the government, but also a policy at local level, maybe the local authority or the school? And everyone should be included.

Problems with (a lack of) governance discussed in the exchange above reflect the level of confusion and unclear leadership/allocation of responsibility discussed by Wilder (2018). Policy, as an element of compliance, is discussed as a possibility for quieting or exacerbating controversies on RSE. Interestingly, students appeared inclined to incorporate elements of a children's rights framework in ensuring that policies and practices are developed through a democratic and community-based approach, one also called for in the No Outsider programme (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009). One of the respondents referred to children's rights in relation to the processes of consultation conducted in the example of the Time for Inclusive Education (TIE) campaign and consultation in Scotland. Although this was not discussed in the focus groups, the different political approaches taken in other parts of the UK were often mentioned as opportunities for comparison and assessment of specific policy making and political agendas.

Discourses of power, control, and compliance also emerged in discussions questioning whether in practice children are considered as incompetent, subordinate, or equal. It is interesting to note how the role of adults as educators is questioned in relation to matters of respect, voice (Robinson, 2005) and participation (Lundy, 2007, Siderac, 2016):

S1: Are children ever trusted and believed? Adults might think 'I am the grown up, I know what is best for you'. This is at the bottom of the relationship between the child and the adult.

S2: It is not empowering or helpful for children to be told let me think this for you let me do this for you, it is important they understand.

S1: I think for me it is a matter of understanding it. Most of teachers don't know what it is, parents think that teachers want to change their children but that is not what rights do. It is all about knowledge and understanding and respect.

Issues of normativity and compliance at a wider societal level were also mentioned, particularly in relation to LGBTIQ+ experiences and whether these should be

explored with children. There was a shared understanding of the dynamic nature of matters discussed in RSE.

> By the time one finishes with this it will be natural. Now it's not there, but once we acquire the knowledge, then it becomes natural. Hopefully in few years' time this will not just be something we are learning, but something we are fully implementing and carrying on.

Respondents discussed the role of technology in terms of both access and opportunities to subvert adult control and requests for compliance, but also in terms of a channel where children would come across realities different from those of their local community.

> We should be flexible to turn our values to ways you can make it more flexible for the children. Technology has changed all, and children can view and access things they should not be seeing. You start with one approach and it becomes a habit and you cannot see the opportunities for change in yourself and in your practice, technology might be helpful to teachers too.

Examining the political and adopting elements of children's rights frameworks opens here for the possibility of education beyond compliance (Gilbert, 2014). It seems that the recognition of RSE as dynamically informed by new socially constructed experiences and tools, such as technology, supports the learning journey and makes it an opportunity for discovery and change.

Technologies of the self
This last category of the problematisation process analyses extracts in which participants introduced reflections on their own value systems and the ways in which they navigate these. In class, the learning journey focused on the analysis of standards set for practitioners, and how to navigate ethical dilemmas stemming from points of struggle between the personal and the professional. This constituted a core element of the assignment for the course, in which students were invited to formulate how the children's rights framework would assist them in acting as advocates for children in engaging with RSE. As a result of this process, students approached the discussions in the focus groups with a similar attitude, positioning themselves as advocates and educators:

> If I am a practitioner my responsibilities are with those children, I have to think about their future, when they go out in the street, in the world. We are educated, we have to be there for them and give them that knowledge our parents didn't give us.

Similarly, respondents shared reflections on their experiences of being minoritised or excluded due to race and/or ethnicity. It is hard to distinguish whether these responses are informed by a need to comply with the teachings of the module, by an acknowledgment of the temporal nature of social discourses, or by the engagement with anti-oppressive practice. Interestingly, in both the examples below, the respondents make indirect references to countering the 'silence' (DePalma &

Atkinson, 2009; Robinson, 2005), both in educators and pupils. It could be argued that this is an indicator of engagement with anti-oppressive practices.

> S1: Personally, I think the views I hold from my cultural background…the children I am working with, in terms of children's rights I am there to provide an enabling environment. That is the main aim of any setting. I need to be there to support this. At first I was like 'what is the point of teaching this in a school?', but then after seeing some cases in the school I thought 'OK, we need to take steps'.

> S2: The way I see this is: I have things I believe in, sure, but the minute I am in a position that I am responsible for people and children I need to push mine aside. Especially if I believe that, you know, society is changing, and we must move with the time. We cannot bury our heads.

It is important to note how in this exchange both students suggest pushing personal views to the side as a strategy to engage in their work with children. This attitude could, however, lead to complacent practices, such as following the need to conform to normativity (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009), or responding to bullying and other incidents by turning a blind eye (Vega et al., 2014).

Conversely, the recognition of the importance of dialogue and relational respect leads to a more empowering argument, in which both educators and pupils are actively engaged and participative:

> As long as it's for the good of the children. I don't see why (HE) students could be against learning and expanding their knowledge on anything really, we are here to be advocates, can I use the word 'advocate'? That is our main theme for coming here, we are learning to support children in any way possible, and if it means learning about their rights, learning about what to do, fighting for their rights that's what we have to do.

From sites of struggle to opportunities for agency-rights

> People learn from each other, so I think talking with children also helps me learning. So I think children's rights pedagogies help thinking about this.

Attitudes and beliefs of educators and practitioners play a central role in the shaping and delivery of RSE (Abbott, Ellis & Abbott, 2016; Alldred & David 2007; van Leent, 2017). Universities, in this case education departments, have the unique opportunity and, arguably, a responsibility to support and develop the knowledge and confidence of prospective practitioners and teachers in approaching RSE (Renold & McGeeney, 2017; Ullman, 2017).

The students' narratives offer an insight into the elements of the educational journey that they discussed as a site of struggle in reflecting about the implementation of RSE in an Early Childhood and Education programme. Through the framework of problematisation (Foucault, 1988), students' experiences are organised thematically under technologies of knowledge, of power and of self.

Previous educational experiences seem to act as a powerful factor in shaping students' learning journeys. Whilst students are familiar with the multifaceted

nature of childhood(s) and with the various elements that they have to consider in their professional work, they also appear to hold a strong sense of loyalty to traditional theoretical formulations widely deployed as foundation knowledge in Early Childhood and Education programmes. Concepts of competence and innocence and the hierarchy of powers between adults and children, as discussed in developmental psychology, inform the core of students' struggles in relation to knowledge. CRE provides opportunities to question and unpack these teachings. The questioning of traditional theories of childhood also positions CRE to challenge traditional power dynamics, in which children are presented as a function of their relations with adults (Burman, 2008). CRE also offers the opportunity for critical reflections on how classic theories, such as attachment theory (Zanatta, 2017), have been incorporated in everyday language and experiences without ever being challenged (Woodhead, 1999). The intersection of CRE with elements of queer theory and critical pedagogy offers the opportunity for 'reimagining of how people engage with forms of being-becoming-belonging otherwise' (Coll & Charlton; 2018, p. 308), for radical deconstructionism, and for the rupture of the conventional status quo. Engaging with children's voices and experiences reconfigures the meaning of competences and skills through a rights-informed perspective. Approaching diverse cultural practices, and unveiling political agendas of othering, supports students through a journey of questioning the solidity of the obstacles produced by their prior knowledge.

The analysis of compliance and performance through a political lens constitutes a second site of struggle for students. The recognition of education as a relational experience, in which acknowledgement and acceptance of not-knowing constitute a site of learning and the opportunity to question powers of a political nature, also opens new possibilities in reframing students' thinking. The democratic and participatory nature of CRE supports experiences of empowerment, in opposition to compliance and performance. This gives students the possibility to challenge social discourses and experiences, fracturing hierarchies of power within and beyond their work with children. I attempted to support this, and admittedly often failed, through the practice of engaged pedagogy, being mindful of the call to 'acknowledge that the education most of us had received and were giving was not and is never politically neutral' (hooks, 1994, p.30). As such, learning about RSE and climate change (the other contemporary issue impacting children's rights, and discussed in the second term of the module) was a political act.

A third site of struggle is found in reflections around ethical dilemmas experienced by students in relation to their personal beliefs and value systems. CRE, underpinned by elements of engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994), creates space for students to view personal experiences through a different frame, a rights-informed one. When I consider my teaching over the years, many students have used the module as an opportunity to reflect on the status of children's rights both in their childhood experiences and in their realities as parents. Reflecting on personal experiences of infringement of rights provides the opportunity to recognise how important it is to be informed of these very rights if one is to be empowered. This resonates with Lundy and Martínez Sainz' (2018) postulation that knowledge of rights diminishes the opportunities for their infringement.

The analysis of findings suggests that the adoption of a rights-based framework allows for the reconsideration of attitudes and views and for a shift towards participation and active citizenry.

Concluding reflections

This paper provides further evidence to substantiate calls for the development of a multiplicity of interventions to address the gap in training, resources and support provided to teachers and practitioners in training (and in service) (Carlile, 2019; van Leent & Ryan, 2015). The findings highlight three core sites of struggle for prospective educators to engage with in their thinking and positioning towards RSE, and how CRE intersected with elements of queer theory and critical pedagogy can support students in navigating these problematic areas. Through this process, students can engage with concepts of equity, respect, diversity and solidarity with and for children, and acquire critical tools to analyse the role of children in RSE (Siderac, 2016). In this learning journey, students are challenged to reframe normative and discriminatory understanding of children, and to acknowledge the possibility that adults 'might not know' and that co-production of knowledge is a powerful tool in navigating conflict and tackling difficulties.

Students' responses highlighted three core sites of struggle: the questioning of pre-existing knowledge; engaging with the 'political'; and navigating ethical dilemmas. The discussion of openings enabled by CRE, intersected in the module with elements of queer theory and critical pedagogy, emphasise the opportunities that CRE holds in shaping attitudes and dispositions in future educators and their work with children. Specifically, CRE emerges as an educational opportunity for students to reconsider the learning and application of dogmatic theories and practices.

To conclude, I argue that the inclusion of intersectional CRE, underpinned by elements of queer theory and critical pedagogy, in the formation of future educators/practitioners offers a unique opportunity for students to question and revisit sites of struggle in their engagement and open new attitudes towards RSE in its form as agency-right.

Acknowledgments

References

Abbott, K., Ellis, S.J., & Abbott, R. (2016).'We've got a lack of family values': An examination of how teachers formulate and justify their approach to teaching sex and relationships education. *Sex Education, 16*(6), 678–691. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2016.1169398

Alldred, P., & David, M. (2007). *Get real about sex: The politics and practice of sex education.* New York Plaza: Open University Press.

Allen-Kinross, P. (2019, November 14). Relationships and sex education: 1 in 10 schools won't consult parents. *Schools Week.* Retrieved from https://schoolsweek.co.uk/ schoolsweek.co.uk

Astuti, B., Sugiyatno, S., & Aminah, S. (2017). The development of early childhood sex education materials for early childhood education (ECE) teachers. *JPPM (Jurnal Pendidikan dan Pemberdayaan Masyarakat), 4*(2), 113-120. https://doi.org/10.21831/jppm.v4i2.14869

Atkinson, E. (2002). Education for diversity in a multisexual society: Negotiating the contradictions of contemporary discourse. *Sex Education, 2* (2), 119–132. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681810220144873

Ball, S. (2013). *Foucault, power, and education*. London: Routledge.

Bernstein, R. (2011). *Racial innocence. Performing American childhood from slavery to civil rights.* New York: New York University Press.

Bersani, L. (1995). *Homos*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Bradbury, A., & Roberts-Holmes, G. (2017). *The datafication of primary and early years education: Playing with numbers (foundations and futures of education).* London: Routledge.

Britzman, D. P. (2012). *Practice makes practice: A critical study of learning to teach.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

Burman, E. (2008). *Deconstructing developmental psychology*. East Sussex: Routledge.

Carlile, A. (2019). Teacher experiences of LGBTQ- inclusive education in primary schools serving faith communities in England, UK. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, *28* (4). https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2019.1681496

Chase, S. E. (2005). Narrative inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research.* Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: SAGE.

Coll, L., & Charlton, E. (2018). Not yet queer, here and now for sexualities and schooling. *Sex Education, 18*(3), 307-320. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2018.1431880

Covell, K., & Howe R.B. (1999). The impact of children's rights education: A Canadian study. *International Journal of Children's Rights, 7*, 171-183. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1746197910370724

da Silva, D. Q., Guerra, O.U., & Sperling, C. (2013). Sex education in the eyes of primary school teachers in Novo Hamburgo, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. *Reproductive Health Matters*, *21*(41), 114-123. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0968-8080(13)41692-0

Darroch J.E., Landry, D.J, & Singh S. (2000). Changing emphasis in sexuality education in U.S. public secondary schools, 1988-1999. *Family Planning Perspectives*, *32*(5), 204-211. https://doi.org/10.2307/2648173

DePalma, R., & Francis, D. A. (2014). The gendered nature of South African teachers' discourse on sex education. *Health Education Research*, *29*(4), 624–632. https://doi.org/10.1093/her/cyt117

DePalma, R., & Atkinson, E. (2009). '*No Outsiders*': Moving beyond a discourse of tolerance to challenge heteronormativity in primary schools. *British Educational Research Journal, 35*(6), 837-855. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920802688705

Department for Education. (2019a). *Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education. Statutory guidance for governing bodies, proprietors, head teachers, principals, senior leadership teams, teachers.* Department for Education. Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education

Department for Education. (2019b). *Guidance. Primary school disruption over LGBT teaching / relationships education.* Department for Education. Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/managing-issues-with-lgbt-teaching-advice-for-local-authorities/primary-school-disruption-over-lgbt-teachingrelationships-education

Dickson, E., Parshall, M., & Brindis, C. D. (2019). Isolated voices: perspectives of teachers, school nurses, and administrators regarding implementation of sexual health education policy. *Journal of School Health.* https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.12853

Edelman, L. (2004). *No future: Queer Theory and the death drive*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Epstein, D., & Johnson, R. (1998). *Schooling sexualities*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

European Expert Group on Sexuality Education. (2016). Sexuality education – what is it? *Sex Education*, *16*(4), 427–431. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2015.1100599

Equality Act. (2010). Equality Act. Retrieved from https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents

Ezer, P., Jones, T., Fisher, C., & Power, J. (2019). A critical discourse analysis of sexuality education in the Australian curriculum. *Sex Education*, *19*(5), 551-567. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2018.1553709

Ferber, A. (2020, September 22). Judith Butler on the culture wars, JK Rowling and living in "anti-intellectual times". *New Statesmen*

https://www.newstatesman.com/international/2020/09/judith-butler-culture-wars-jk-rowling-and-living-anti-intellectual-times

Foucault, M. (1988). Technologies of the self. In L.H. Martin, H. Gutman & P.H. Hutton (Eds.), *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault.* Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts Press.

Gilbert, J. (2014). *Sexuality in school: The limits of education*. Minneapolis: Minnesota Press.

Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

hooks, bell. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.

Iyer, P., & Aggleton, P. (2013). 'Sex education should be taught, fine . . . but we make sure they control themselves': Teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards young people's sexual and reproductive health in a Ugandan secondary school. *Sex Education*, *13*(1), 40–53. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2012.677184

Jabareen, Y. (2009). Building a conceptual framework: Philosophy, definitions, and procedure. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 49–62. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800406

James, A., & Prout, A. (1997). *Constructing and reconstructing childhood: New directions in the sociological study of childhood*. Oxford: Routledge.

Jarke, J. & Breiter, A. (2019). Editorial: The datafication of education. *Learning, Media and Technology. 44(*1), 1-6. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2019.1573833

Johnston, L. (2019). *Transforming gender, sex and place: gender variant geographies.* New York: Routledge.

Jones, K. (2014). Conservatism and educational crisis: The case of England, *Education Inquiry. 5*(1), 89-108. https://doi.org/10.3402/edui.v5.24046

Kincheloe J.L. (2008). *Knowledge and critical pedagogy. Explorations of educational purpose*. Vol 1. Dordrecht: Springer.

Latour,V. (2012). 'Muscular liberalism': surviving multiculturalism? A historical and political contextualisation of David Cameron's Munich speech. *Observatoire de la société britannique. 12*, 199-216. https://doi.org/10.4000/osb.1355

Lewis, J., & Knijn, T. (2002). The politics of sex education policy in England and Wales and the Netherlands since the 1980s. *Journal of Social Policy, 31*(4), 669-694. http://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279402006761

Lewis, S. (2019, February 7). How British feminism became anti-trans. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/07/opinion/terf-trans-women-britain.html

Liebel, M. (2012). Children's rights contextualized. In M. Liebel, (Ed.), *Children's rights from below: Cross-cultural perspectives.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lundy, L., & Martínez Sainz, G. (2018). The role of law and legal knowledge for a transformative human rights education: Addressing violations of children's rights in formal education. *Human Rights Education Review*, *1*(2), 4-24. https://doi.org/10.7577/hrer.2560

Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice' is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*, *33*(6), 927-942. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033

Martin, J., Riazi, H., Firoozi, A., & Nasiri, M. (2020). A sex education program for teachers of preschool children: A quasi-experimental study in Iran. *BMC Public Health*, *20*, 692. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-08826-y

Martino, W., & Cumming-Potvin, W. (2016). Teaching about sexual minorities and "princess boys": A queer and trans-infused approach to investigating LGBTQ-themed texts in the elementary school classroom. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 37*(6), 807-827. https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2014.940239

Mayall, B. (2006). Values and assumptions underpinning policy for children and young people in England. *Children's Geographies*, *4*(1), 9–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/14733280600576923

McLaren, P. (2003). Critical pedagogy: A look at the major concepts. in: A. Darder, M. Baltodano & R. Torres (Eds.), *The Critical Pedagogy Reader.* New York, NY: Routledge-Falmer.

Montgomery, H. (2008). *An introduction to childhood: Anthropological perspectives on children's lives.* Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Nelson, B., Odberg, K., & Emmelin, M. (2020). Experiences of teaching sexual and reproductive health to students with intellectual disabilities. *Sex Education*, *20*(4), 398-412. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2019.1707652

National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children & National Education Union. (2019, July 11). NEU and NSPCC survey into school readiness for RSE lessons 2020. Retrieved from https://neu.org.uk/press-releases/neu-and-nspcc-survey-school-readiness-rse-lessons-2020

Osgood, J. (2010). Reconstructing professionalism in ECEC: The case for the 'critically reflective emotional professional'. *Early Years: An International Research Journal, 30*(2), 119-133. https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2010.490905

Osler, A. (2016). *Human rights and schooling: an ethical framework for teaching for social justice.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Peleg, N. (2019). *The child's right to development.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Renold, E., & McGeeney, E. (2017). *The future of the sex and relationships education curriculum in Wales: Recommendations of the Sex and Relationships Education Expert Panel.* Project Report. Cardiff: Welsh Government.

Robinson, K. H. (2005). Childhood and sexuality: Adult constructions and silenced children. In: J. Mason & T., Fattore (Eds.), *Children taken seriously in theory, policy and practice.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Robinson, K. H. (2012). 'Difficult citizenship': The precarious relationships between childhood, sexuality and access to knowledge. *Sexualities*, *15*(3–4), 257–276. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460712436469

Robinson, K. H., &Davies, C. (2017). Sexuality education in Early Childhood. In L. Allen & M. L. Rasmussen (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Sexuality Education*. London: Palgrave.

Roodsaz, R. (2018). Probing the politics of comprehensive sexuality education: 'Universality' versus 'Cultural Sensitivity': a Dutch–Bangladeshi collaboration on adolescent sexuality education. *Sex Education,* (*1*), 107–121.
https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2017.1403894

Selman, P. (2003). Scapegoating and moral panics: Teenage pregnancy in Britain and the United States. In: S. Cunningham-Burley & L. Jamieson (Eds.), *Families and the State*. Palgrave Macmillan: London.

Siderac, S. (2016). Derechos humanos, educación sexual integral y campo de las prácticas: ejes de transversalidad curricular para la formación de profesorxs en la UNlpam / human rights, comprehensive sex education and practices: mainstreaming curricular axes for Teacher Tra. *Praxis Educativa, 20(3*), 18-31.
https://doi.org/10.19137/praxiseducativa-2016-200303

Steinberg, S. R. (2012). Critical pedagogy and cultural studies research: Bricolage in action source. *Counterpoints*, *422*, 230-254.

Tibbitts, F.L. (2017). Revisiting 'Emerging models of human rights education'. *International Journal of Human Rights Education*, *1*(1). Retrieved from Retrieved from https://repository.usfca.edu/ijhre/vol1/iss1/2

Ullman, J. (2017). Teacher positivity towards gender diversity: Exploring relationships and school outcomes for transgender and gender-diverse students. *Sex Education*, *17*(3), 276-289.
https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2016.1273104

van Leent, L., & Ryan, M. (2015). The changing experiences of primary teachers: Responding to scenarios involving diverse sexualities. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 20*(7), 711-725.
https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2015.1111443

van Leent, L. (2017). Supporting school teachers: Primary teachers' conceptions of their responses to diverse sexualities, *Sex Education,* (4), 440-453.
https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2017.1303369

Vega, S., Glynn, H.,& van Pelt, J.L. (2012). Safe schools for LGBTQI students: How do teachers view their role in promoting safe schools? *Equity & Excellence in Education,* (2), 250-260. https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2012.671095

Wilder, R. (2018). 'Knowledge' in English primary schools' decision-making about sex and relationships education. *Health Education Journal*, *77*(1), 30–42. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0017896917737343

Wolley, R. (2011). Controversial issues: Identifying the concerns and priorities of student teachers. *Policy Futures in Education, 9*(2), 280-291. https://doi.org/10.2304%2Fpfie.2011.9.2.280

Woodhead, M. (1999). Reconstructing developmental psychology: Some first steps. *Children & Society*, (1), 3–19. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.1999.tb00097.x

Wyness, M. (2015). *Childhood.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Zanatta, F. (2017). *Beyond the dyad. An ethnographic journey revisiting attachment theory with African-Caribbean families in London.* Unpublished Thesis, University College London.

Zanatta, F. (2018). Are we really doomed? Critical pathways for advancing children's rights through theory and practice-In G. Martinez Sainz & S., Ilie (Eds.), *International perspectives on practice and research into children's rights.* Mexico: Centre for Human Rights Studies.

Zanatta, F., & Long, S. (2021). Rights to the front. Rights based education in Early Childhood degrees. *Journal of Early Childhood Education Research*, *10*(1) *(manuscript accepted).*

Zanatta, F. (forthcoming) A right(s) way. Teaching and learning children's rights in HEIs through knowledge deconstruction and sustainable activism.

Zimmerman, J. (2015). *Too hot to handle: A global history of sex education*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.