

Growing sideways: Re-articulating ontologies of childhood within/through relationships and sexuality education (RSE)

Catherine Atkinson¹  | Leanne Coll² | Ruari-Santiago McBride³ |
Elsie Whittington⁴  | Francesca Zanatta⁵ 

¹Manchester Institute of Education,
University of Manchester, Manchester,
UK

²School of Policy and Practice, Dublin
City University, Dublin, Ireland

³School of Education, University of
Limerick, Limerick, Ireland

⁴Safer Young Lives Research Centre,
University of Bedfordshire, Luton, UK

⁵School of Education and Communities,
University of East London, London, UK

Correspondence

Catherine Atkinson, Manchester
Institute of Education, University of
Manchester, Manchester, UK.
Email: catherine.atkinson-3@
manchester.ac.uk

Abstract

This article presents a collaborative reflective-thinking-writing project that draws from the authors' experiences of co-productive and critical inquiry with children in the field of gender, sexualities and education. Integrating our collective concerns regarding how childhood can be negatively framed and policed within/through RSE, we explore how these ontological boundaries might be queered through a collective engagement with the possibilities for/of RSE that is affirmative, playful and co-produced with, rather than for, children.

KEYWORDS

childhood, gender, ontology, rights, sex education

INTRODUCTION

The unexpected, disorientating educational upheaval brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic has unearthed and magnified unsettling educational realities, laying bare the stark educational inequalities that persist within many communities and across contexts along registers of ability, class, gender and race (Dunn et al., 2020). This moment of educational disruption has drawn into sharp relief the ontology of childhood and its links to education. With the need to reconfigure schooling in light of Covid-19, children are being (re-)constructed as responsible citizens who have the ability to receive complex factual information about the virus—how it spreads and the

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2022 The Authors. *Children & Society* published by National Children's Bureau and John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

consequences of it—and to act accordingly. Access to such knowledge has been positioned as a necessity for children to gain a sense of control over their lives, empowering them to make informed decisions and reducing their anxiety by allowing them to distinguish between facts, rumours and misinformation. Such responses illuminate the contingent nature of children's subjectivities and the varied ways in which their being and becoming is a constant process of negotiation with both human and non-human entities and forces (Burns, 2013; Mayes, 2016; Spyrou, 2019).

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is an important example of a curricular area where the complexity of these ontological issues coalesce and collide. At a global level, although educational contexts are responsible for (and have the potential to) centre and respond to children's own learning and experiences of RSE-related issues, there exists a historical battle between the political-policy-pedagogical in this space (see for example Allen, 2011; Fields, 2008; Jones, 2011). In what follows, we present a critical and collaborative reflective-thinking-writing project undertaken by a collective of early career feminist and queer educational researchers based across Australia, England and Ireland. As a collective, the moment of profound uncertainty and insecurity triggered by Covid-19 provided a unique opportunity for us to disarrange, reflect upon and re-imagine the ontology of childhood(s) within/through RSE. Drawing from our practices of co-productive and critical inquiry with children in the field of gender, sexualities and education we integrate our collective experiences and concerns regarding how the ontology of childhood is negatively framed and policed both within and beyond our own contexts.

In this paper, we focus on four aspects of significance internationally in RSE scholarship and practice: the concept of readiness of children, the possibility for queering education, the wish for trans-formative education and the space of affective learning and relations. In doing so, we explore how the boundaries of childhood might be queered (cf. Stryker et al., 2019) through a collective engagement with the possibilities for/of RSE that is affirmative, playful and co-produced with, rather than for, children. In re-articulating ontologies of childhood within/through RSE we draw on queer, trans and feminist scholars who have long since challenged thinking in this space. An emphasis is placed in the reflective pieces shared on re-engaging with the possibilities for ontologies of childhood that queer and question the dominance of normativity, oppression and discrimination to reorientate us towards what more RSE might be. Building on this, we offer an open ending, an invite for researchers, scholars and educators alike to embrace non-hierarchical, participatory and play-full possibilities for and of RSE.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

Theoretical underpinnings

Nowhere are the ontological boundaries of 'childhood' more contested than within and through RSE (Allred & Fox, 2019). Religious morality, moral panic and dominant political interests continue to shape debates over what is 'appropriate' and 'relevant' RSE (Allen, 2018; Coll et al., 2018; Fields & Hirschman, 2007). Internationally speaking, analysis of the values ingrained within RSE content, and the norms communicated through its delivery, provide insight into representations of and attitudes towards children (Jones, 2011; Robinson, 2012). Discourses of risk, innocence and vulnerability are particularly dominant, crystallised and unyielding (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Fields, 2004). There exists an enduring assumption that knowledge about gender expression, identity and sexuality is *dangerous* for children and linked to the 'corruption' of their 'innocence' (Robinson, 2012). This is despite persistent arguments that age is an 'empty signifier' of competence (Hirst, 2008; Waites, 2004).

The myth of childhood innocence reflects the broad moral-political discomfort with, and hostility towards, children's affective relations and their embodied gender and sexuality (Fields, 2004; Fields & Hirschman, 2007; Fields & Tolman, 2006). As such, RSE in many contexts has been positioned as a vehicle to shield children's innocence through risk-averse approaches (Gilbert, 2017). The 'moral panic' that engulfs children's affects downplays the complexity of their embodiment and renders all talk about relationships, gender and sexuality provocative and controversial (Fields, 2012). The cocooning of ('innocent') children from ('dangerous') knowledge involves the purposeful obfuscation of the materiality of young people's embodied gender and sexuality becomings (Bragg et al., 2018). At a global level, enduring (often public) debates surrounding children and RSE are in stark contrast to the strength of evidence that continues to call for children to learn key vocabulary about anatomy, identity, boundaries and in simple terms the difference between 'harmful and healthy' (sexual) relationships (Renold & McGeeney, 2017; Robinson, 2012; Sanjakdar & Yip, 2018). It also fails to acknowledge young people's capacities to *feel-think-do* gender and sexuality differently, in complex and nuanced ways (Renold et al., 2020), and their desires for radically different sexuality education experiences (Coll et al., 2020; Renold, 2019).

In contrast, there exists a vibrant body of research literature which has enabled educational researchers-educators to think and feel differently about the transformative potentials of RSE (Gilbert et al., 2018) and account for the 'more than' of pedagogy and inquiry in RSE environments (Alldred & Fox, 2019; Renold, 2018). This evidence is made up of practice-informed and child-centred research from the broad and intersecting fields of safeguarding, children's rights, law, health, education and more (Coy et al., 2013; Gilbert, 2017; Lloyd, 2018; Whittington, 2019). Yet the necessary pedagogical and curriculum decision making is routinely held back by that what Robinson (2012) positions as a fear of 'the knowing child', which is rooted in problematic and paternalistic notions of 'age appropriateness':

the child who is perceived to 'know too much' about sexuality (i.e. has the knowledge and language to speak about sexuality) for its age, is constituted as the non-innocent or the corrupted child. (2012: 264)

In what follows, we consider RSE as a unique opening to reconsider the ontology of childhood, and to challenge the restrictive and harmful constructions of children as innocent, irrational and disembodied beings. We do this by highlighting the wide array of ways in which young people are let down by—but also negotiate and resist—contemporary boundaries of RSE (and indeed schooling). In particular, we consider what might be made possible through co-productive and appreciative orientated (Ludema & Fry, 2008) methodological and pedagogical forms of inquiry in/through RSE (Quinlivan, 2018; Renold, 2019; Whittington and Thomson, 2018). Drawing on queer, trans and feminist re-articulations of childhood ontologies, including an emphasis on relationality and embodiment, we explore, dissect and connect matters and ideas related to what more RSE might be.

Methods

As a group of five early career researchers, we come to the fields of 'childhood studies' and 'education,' from a variety of entry points and interdisciplinary standpoints including anthropology, criminology, education, human rights, psychoanalysis, public health, women's studies and sociology. As a collective with differing trajectories, theoretical understandings and lived

experiences, our shared passion for RSE futures that are inclusive, empowering and meaningful to young people was an important entry point for us. We are connected by our dedication to working with rather than for young people in transforming RSE.

Our collaboration is a product of serendipitous meetings and existing connections across classrooms, conferences and pub tables throughout and beyond our post-graduate and early career pathways. The timing of our coming together, the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, was particularly poignant in that most of our early discussions were furthered by our collective observations of how children and young people were being framed in global discussions specific to the pandemic and schooling. For us, discourses surrounding the 'new normal' within schools brought into sharp relief the ontology of childhood and its links to education. With the need to reconfigure schooling in light of Covid-19 children are being (re-)constructed as responsible citizens who have the ability to receive complex factual information about the virus, how it spreads and the consequences of it—and to act accordingly. Access to such knowledge has been positioned as a necessity for children to gain a sense of control over their lives, empowering them to make informed decisions and reducing their anxiety by allowing them to distinguish between facts, rumours and misinformation. This also illuminates the contingent nature of children's subjectivities and the varied ways in which their being and becoming is a constant process of negotiation with both human and non-human entities and forces (Burns, 2013; Mayes, 2016; Spyrou, 2019). Yet, the introduction of Covid-19 public health measures also highlighted how schooling ill-prepares children for being and becoming otherwise. Difficulties negotiating social distancing foregrounds how many schools do not provide opportunities for children to explore the negotiation of personal boundaries and seeking/providing informed consent (Brady & Lowe, 2019). Restrictions around social interaction, furthermore, compel us to confront what constitutes a partner, a family or a household. The double-edged nature of 'shielding' and 'cocooning' vulnerable citizens underscores how paternal interventions may offer protection from one danger (e.g. infection), but in doing so create new ones (e.g. social isolation).

For us, the complexity of these ontological issues and their relationship to our experiences and concerns specific to futures of RSE was an important avenue to explore. Informal conversations and reflections via Zoom between the five authors developed into the idea to connect our experiences and interrogate further our collective concern that, despite insights and advances made by affirmative and radical educators-researchers, there exists a continued refusal of children's rights and dominance of 'childhood innocence' discourses in many contemporary global debates surrounding what RSE might be and become (Renold & McGeeney, 2017). We have witnessed, researched and in some cases participated in this through projects in diverse cultural and policy contexts.

Methodologically, specifically in the choice of a dialogic approach as a form of data collection, we were inspired by Baldwin and Mead's (1971) publication 'A Rap on Race.' The adoption of dialogue as a data collection method encouraged an opening in the sharing of our beliefs, values, concepts and practices (MacInnis & Portelli, 2002). This unique entry point allowed us to consider how we might engage in a queering of the boundaries of childhood through our collective encounters with RSE. Echoing Baldwin's (1971) wording for their initial proposition, the reflective encounters between us as authors stemmed from the premise to trace the boundaries of 'the riddle of childhood' through RSE. The choice of transdisciplinary and collective dialogue as a methodological form was influenced by the possibility for different temporalities to be included in the reflective act. In this piece, dialogue is situated between narrative inquiry, where the lens focuses on 'retrospective meaning making' (Chase, 2005: 656), and manifesto writing, where 'dreamers and artists [imagine] something new' and engage in transformative work to supersede

traditions (Faahs, 2019: 4). This form of collective thinking was a platform to reconstitute childhood and RSE through a process of ‘sticking together’ (Kehily & Nayak, 2017: 22) experience, being, practice, research, individuality and more. Dialogue as a method allowed for a bringing together of a cacophony of different voices, assembled to a multifaceted unity which accounts for and celebrates dissonance, synergy and divergence.

Over a period of 6 months we, as a collective, held a total of six online dialogues via the medium of Zoom. The first dialogue offered a space for gathering ideas and outlining our methodological approach with regards to both paradigms and actions. Following this first encounter, we set a task for each member of the collective to compose a brief reflective piece responding to the riddle of childhood through our encounters with RSE. This initial provocation was intentionally left broad in its reach, so that each member could creatively contribute with a piece primarily influenced by their own existing knowledge, experience, positionality and aspirations. All the pieces were then shared, read and questioned over in the four online dialogues that followed. These encounters informed the assemblage of these pieces into four collective reflective pieces which focus on four broad concepts: readiness, queer future(s), trans-formations and affect. In terms of voice, as authors we alternate dynamically in a multitude of roles (such as speaker, listener, object, observer) to come together in proposing points that emerge from this collective questioning and problematisation (Gardiner, 1996).

THE ‘RIDDLE OF CHILDHOOD’ AND RSE

How ontologies of childhood are conceptualised has profound implications for the possibilities of and for RSE. Moving beyond critiques of past and present configurations of RSE towards viable and creative alternatives, our collective experiences and process of thinking with theory in the sections that follow are our collective attempts towards re-articulating ontologies of childhood within/through RSE. This re-articulation is guided by queer-trans-feminist theories and scholars whose onto-epistemological approaches to childhood—which emphasise the entanglement (rather than separation) of knowing and being—guide a thinking otherwise and a thinking beyond structures of oppression, performativity and normalisation (Allred & Fox, 2019; Mayes, 2019; Renold et al., 2020). We purposefully resist labelling these ontologies, and the practices and pedagogies scaffolding and enabling them, as ‘radical’ or ‘new’. These re-articulations are not a novelty; they are always already present in classrooms, research and everyday encounters with children.¹ These onto-epistemological approaches are always already felt, witnessed and accounted for, albeit in the margins. They affect us (move us) to do research differently.

Rethinking readiness

Notions of ‘readiness’ are dominant in discourses relating to childhood and youth sexualities, gender expression and RSE. In particular, there exists a dominant debate relating to *when* (what age) children are ‘ready’ to learn about ‘sex’, gender and relationships more broadly. The recent UNFPA (2018) International Technical Guidelines on Sexuality Education emphasise the need for RSE as a tool for safeguarding. This latest shift (back) to promoting RSE arguably builds on discourses surrounding children’s sexuality, which are acutely focused on harm, risk, safety² and protection (Clapton et al., 2012; Lloyd et al., 2020). This is not unwarranted, given recent revelations of historic and institutional sexual violation in England and elsewhere (Clapton et al., 2012;

Lefevre et al., 2019). However, the overemphasis on deficit notions of ‘risk-safety’ also police the boundaries of childhood; who counts as children, how to recognise sexual agency (readiness) and abuse in different contexts, and how best to balance children’s rights to protection and participation (Beckett & Warrington, 2015; Firmin et al., 2016; Lefevre et al., 2019; Pearce, 2013). Much of the aforementioned work that focuses on safeguarding has been referenced *because it actively* prioritises young people’s experiences, opinions and rights while reframing discussions about protection. There remains a gap, however, between what the evidence says (talk more openly and explicitly to children and young people about gender, power, sex, desire and boundaries at an earlier age) and what is supported and enabled by policy and practice.

Much of this ‘gap’ is maintained and reproduced by, and reproduces, a conservative and paternalistic discourse of childhood innocence which regulates/constrains children’s access to (sexual) knowledge and information. A particularly clear example of this can be seen in England’s most recent RSE guidelines, within which parents continue to be given the right to withdraw (shield) children from sex education until the age of 16 (Department for Education, 2019). This reveals an explicit sidelining of children’s right to knowledge; particularly visible in the decision to ‘automatically grant’ parents’ requests to withdraw primary-aged children from sex education (this differs from at secondary school, where requests should only be granted after a full discussion with parents, including about ‘any detrimental effects that withdrawal might have on the child’ (Department for Education, 2019: 17). The comparative ease with which parents may withdraw primary-aged children in England betrays a clear devaluing of this subject as it applies to children under the age of 11; equating ‘age’ and ‘readiness’, and giving further weight to the importance of the ‘innocent’ (or ‘cocooned’) child.

Re-articulations of readiness which embrace the entanglement between knowing and being account for co-productive forms of praxis in RSE that enable pedagogical possibilities for consent and dissent; engaging with ‘grey areas’; and acknowledging a spectrum of sexual ethics (Renold et al., 2021; Whittington, 2021). This involves paying attention to ‘silly’ or ‘what if..?’ questions and coded disclosures of (in)experience regardless of age (Renold et al., 2021; Whittington, 2019). Starting with the queries and questions of children is essential because it ‘overrides assumptions that students, and younger people will ask the right questions by themselves, before they have experiences’ (both good and bad) to draw from (Graf & Schweiger, 2017: 176). There is no question that *experiences* at any age are important in shaping how children engage with and talk about some of the more complex elements of sexual negotiation, sexuality and gender identity or expression. The importance of grounding the educational experience within the reality of children’s everyday lives calls for pedagogical approaches that value, authorise and appreciate children’s capacities as knowledge brokers, makers and key stakeholders. Importantly, this also includes ways of knowing-being that are often unwelcome, unspoken and punished in the current schooling system (Romero, 2018).

Queer future(s)

In what Ferfolja and Ullman (2020) have termed a ‘culture of limitation’, the range of political, social and cultural influences that inform the approaches that schools take in relation to RSE too often set the limits for what is permissible. A further manifestation of the ‘childhood innocence’ discourse outlined above relates to the continued privileging of heterosexualities in RSE. Again, taking England as an example, the recent 2019 RSE guidelines position LGBTIQ+³ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer) identities primarily in relation to ‘risk’, ‘bullying’

and ‘protected characteristics’ (and almost all in the context of the school’s legal obligation to meet the requirements of the Equalities Act 2010). These guidelines work to frame LGBTIQ+ identities as fundamentally ‘wounded’ (Youdell, 2004), and position genuine ‘inclusion’ as secondary to the mitigation of (presumed inevitable) ‘LGBTIQ+ bullying’ (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009). Discussion of LGBTIQ+ identities in this document is also both brief and vague, with a generally individualising and ‘contingent’ tone. Regarding LGBTIQ+ families and students, there is an assumption that the discussion of gender and sexuality is dependent on the presence in school of a child or family who displays these ‘protected characteristics’. This enables schools to dismiss the need for teaching around diversity on the grounds of ‘relevance’, leading to both a reinscription of gender-sexuality essentialisms (where, e.g. gender-non conforming boys are identified as gay, and thus in need of ‘extra support’), and a denial of the impact of heteronormativity and homophobia on *all* students (see Airton, 2009).

Too often schooling works to reproduce a ‘compliance culture’ which reinforces risk avoidance and gendered messages about sexual interaction (Gilbert, 2017; Kehily, 2002). The extent to which educators are able to bring young people ‘into presence’ (Biesta, 2005) about sex, gender identity and diverse relationship practices depends on the constraints of the institutions in which they work, as well as their training, confidence and experience, and connection to the youth cultures they seek to influence (Aldred, 2018; Whittington, 2021). It is clear, however, that children resist these curriculum constraints through independent/collective enquiry about gender and sexuality that often goes beyond formal school curricula (Bragg et al., 2018).

As Renold et al. (2020: 441) highlight, children ‘are marching, petitioning, organising, performing, crafting, singing, dancing, vlogging and hash-tagging their anger, pain and frustration at the new twists and turns of persistent intersectional gender and sexual injustices and violence in these various movements’. Children continue to be involved in diverse ways and in different forms of political action in relation to issues that matter to them. This re-articulation of childhood in terms of agency accounts for and acknowledges the important ethical commitments required to map the ways in which children as political agents expand and transgress boundaries of childhood. Emboldening children as political beings challenges constructs of shame, and shameful responses to legitimate questions that wish to explore knowledge and understanding beyond withdrawals, hidden practices, and dangers. Recognising this agency opens up opportunities for children to cultivate the vocabulary to explain, explore and act upon experiences, observations, desires and the boundaries of conservative approaches to gender, sexuality, rights, citizenship and surveillance. Children are developing complex and nuanced vocabularies whether we (adults in positions of power to support or undermine access to information) think they are ‘ready’ to think about, explore or access this kind of information and relationality. The following section highlights this with reference to the experiences of trans⁴ young people.

Trans-formations

Historically, the lives, bodies and experiences of trans and non-binary people have been absent within educational policy and practice. This is reflective of the broad cultural bias towards cisgender experience, which is characterised by a congruency between assigned birth sex and embodied gender identity (see Enke (2012) for a critical discussion on the history of ‘cis’). By way of an example, in Ireland cisgender experiences are institutionally privileged, the bodies, identities and experiences of children that eschew conservative binaries of male:female/masculinity:femininity have been educationally marginalised (McBride, 2020). The exclusion of

gender diversity topics from Irish classrooms generally, and RSE in Ireland in particular, has led knowledge associated with trans and non-binary lives to circulate beyond the boundaries of formal acceptability (Neary, 2021). Educational silence has rendered gender diversity invisible within schools and reproduced stigma against gender identities that are neither cisgender nor binary (Neary, 2021).

Across other contexts—educational policy across Wales, Scotland and England for example—we have witnessed a gradual shift towards an increased recognition that information about gender diversity is essential knowledge in edging towards a future in which children are readily educated about trans and non-binary lives (Department for Education, 2019; Scottish Government, 2018; Welsh Government, 2017). Yet, even in contexts in which trans and non-binary identities are recognised within national RSE guidance, many young people are still denied opportunities to meaningfully discuss gender diversity during their schooling (see Miller, 2016; Neary, 2018). Divergences between policy and practices exposes the under-preparedness of some educators, and the unwillingness of others, to discuss gender in an open and frank manner (Meyer & Leonardi, 2018). The discretionary exclusion of trans and non-binary children within RSE at an international level invokes the negative perception of children as innocent, at-risk subjects who lack the agentic maturity to receive knowledge about gender diversity (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018). This un/conscious prohibition suggests that some educators consider knowledge about gender diversity to be (at best) uncomfortable and (at worst) dangerous and corrupting. Furthermore, it points to the adultist assumption that children lack the cognitive capacity to self-determine their gender identity. Ultimately, the under-preparedness/unwillingness of some educators to engage gender diversity pedagogically serves to narrow all children's ability to comprehend gender beyond cisgender norms, and impairs the readiness of trans and non-binary children to live a life beyond binary categories of male:female/masculinity:femininity.

Curricular exclusion is at odds with the lived experience of children who identify as trans or non-binary. Within schools, some trans and non-binary children draw on their personal experiences and the knowledge they have acquired online and through peers to disrupt the educational erasure they encounter (McBride & Neary, 2021). This they do by occupying pedagogical space and giving voice to trans and non-binary experiences in class (Jones et al., 2016). Through conversations in non-formal spaces (hallways, toilets, playgrounds), trans and non-binary youth informally educate their peers (McBride & Neary, 2021). Many trans and non-binary children are also necessitated to educate their educators about gender diversity and the experiences of trans and non-binary youth (Meyer et al., 2016). The need for trans and non-binary children to educate peers and staff can be emotionally taxing for some (Austin, 2016), but also personally rewarding for others (McBride & Neary, 2021). The vigour and verve with which trans and non-binary children actively resist educational erasure underscores how children act as disruptive agents, with the capacity to centre marginalised knowledge and propel new ways of thinking and feeling about gender among their school community. Through their readiness to be transformative, trans and non-binary youth challenge the cisnormativity inherent within contemporary pedagogical regimes. This points to the importance of recognising and respecting the right of all children to self-determine their gender identity and to make identity-affirming choices. Meanwhile, their acts of queer pedagogical resistance suggest a need to reconfigure binary notions of teacher/student and recognise that children are not empty receptacles to be educated, but knowing agents capable of collaborating and taking the lead on their own/others' learning (including educators).

Affect

There is a swell of affect. Blushed faces, some flinching, sideways glances to friends, hands covering mouths and a student in the front row biting their bottom lip to prevent the laughter from escaping. Rows of wide-eyes. Bodies in the room seem charged in anticipation, vibrating with laughter and burning with unease (Adapted from Ollis et al, forthcoming 2022).

The ‘affective scratching’ (Dernikos et al., 2020) shared above is illustrative of our collective and embodied experiences of empirical research and pedagogical praxis with children in RSE. This scratching is offered as an invitation for readers to reconsider RSE classrooms as sites where things happen that we do not have words for but that still profoundly *matter* (Boltdt, 2020).

There is no denying that within the context of RSE (and beyond) teaching and learning are affectively loaded events in which bodies are implicated in the learning process. Discomforts, difficult emotions and speculative encounters are a significant part of the shared learning experience. Attending to affect in our re-articulation of childhood provides a unique opportunity to imagine more complex, creative and critical engagements with some of the discourses of ‘discomfort’, ‘innocence’ and ‘fear’ mentioned previously, which tend to dominate debates surrounding the ontology of childhood. Attending to children’s embodied responses, relational encounters and emerging entanglements in RSE is also central to queer-trans-feminist forms of pedagogical praxis (Renold, 2019) linked to the possibilities for/of RSE that is affirmative, playful and co-produced with, rather than for, children.

As Hickey-Moody (2013:229), writes ‘affect is what moves us. It’s a hunch. A visceral prompt’. The significance of affects ‘lies in the intensities they build and in what thoughts and feelings they make possible’ (Dernikos et al., 2020:3). This necessitates a shift beyond increasing knowledge or modifying behaviour. Internationally speaking, in the era of Covid-19 related restrictions and beyond, new developments within RSE policy-pedagogy-curriculum are equally endangered to fall within the binary between theory and practice, with the risk that its content will include primarily comfortable and unchallenging material, avoiding the complex and nuanced. The expectations, fears and desires that educators bring into classroom spaces can sometimes be the biggest barrier for doing sexuality education differently. As Quinlivan (2018:45) argues, the greatest challenge for researcher-educators in sexuality education is to ‘cultivate a less decidable pedagogical space, and to not have already decided what it is that ... young people need to know’. While unsettling, this inability to let go of lingering affect and not to search for closure may open up opportunities for children and adult allies to carve alternative and transformative pedagogical encounters in and through RSE. Working with these affective encounters is integral to the process of reworking established patterns outlined earlier in sections specific to readiness and possibilities for queer-trans-feminist RSE futures. When consumed by worries of what should or must happen in RSE, even the most well intended or radically orientated educator-researcher can miss the opportunity to experiment with what is already happening.

AN OPEN ENDING...

Collectively our work acknowledges the multiplicity and complexity of children’s gender and sexual becomings. In particular, it adds to a body of evidence that calls for the potentials and possibilities of RSE that places an emphasis on encountering and valuing the creativity already in emergence

in children's lives, and the diverse range of ways in which they are already pursuing and imagining new horizons for/within/through RSE (Quinlivan, 2018; Renold, 2019). In this paper, we have attempted to speak back to problematic assumptions of childhood through the international landscape of educational reform and pedagogical practice specific to RSE. Our goal has been to critically and creatively engage with the contradictory and unchartered dialogues that recognise and embolden, rather than hide and denounce, children's creative capacities. Through our own queer-trans-feminist forms of praxis with children we have found that children are creative future-makers (Spyrou, 2020), who are able (ready), and wanting (and raring) to talk and learn about the nuances and practicalities of negotiating (gendered/sexual/romantic) relationships with themselves and others; even if these are not relationships they feel personally 'ready' for at the time.

As we shift towards new realities of living (or a 'new normal') in response to Covid-19, more than ever there is a need to embrace the speculative, messy, unpleasant, relational, complex and unsaid with children in school spaces. This requires a reconsideration of the positions, the relations, the human and the non-human forces that make up education (Mayes, 2019); the entanglement of which are illuminated in the reflective pieces above. The playful, critical and collective process central to the development and writing of this paper has been an important launching in our journeys towards embracing the continuum of complex perspectives and non-linear approaches to RSE. Through our work with one another we have been pushed to re-articulate our own onto-epistemological process and challenged to embrace the speculative potentials of our individual and collective projects with children and young people. Similar to Mills et al. (2020), for us, this more-than-critical friendship created a collective subjectivity which enabled a richer, more joyous and more fulfilling experience of reading-writing-thinking-being-doing in academia. It has also acted as an important reminder for us that the same commitment to playful, co-productive and creative encounters that inspires our work with children can also propel our approach to working with one another.

Shifts towards new realities also necessitate a greater appreciation of affirmative disruptions and the ethical matterings of queer-feminist forms of scholarship and activism which come to matter and make a difference (Renold et al., 2020). Broadening the conceptual reaches of childhood is critical if work to create spaces for children, and the adults who support them, to embrace the speculative and playful possibilities for/of RSE are to be realised. We believe a re-articulation of ontologies of childhood is and should be at the heart of this endeavour.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to the two reviewers who provided constructive and encouraging comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Thanks also to the Gender and Education Association for bringing us together, and to all the children and young people who were involved in the various research projects discussed in this paper. R.-S McBride would like to thank Aoife Neary, Vanessa Lacey and Breda Gray for their support and funding provided by the Irish Research Council and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (Grant number CLNE/2018/165).

ORCID

Catherine Atkinson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2211-6405>

Elsie Whittington  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5762-404X>

Francesca Zanatta  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8490-2217>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ In this article we use the word ‘child/children’ to refer to people aged under-18 who do not have the legal rights and responsibilities of an ‘adult’, whilst simultaneously troubling the idea of childhood as a unitary category (Wyness, 2015).
- ² Safety for many young people is more about the safety of their social status (which includes health and unwanted pregnancy) over and above other more adult and public health framings of ‘safety’ (see e.g. Ringrose and Renold, 2010).
- ³ Whilst the UK guidelines use ‘LGBT’ throughout, we use LGBTIQ+ to acknowledge a broader spectrum of identities. We recognise, however, that LGBTIQ+ is not an all-encompassing term and there are many identities and experiences that are not recognised in this Western abbreviation, for example indigenous gender identities.
- ⁴ We use trans as an inclusive, umbrella term to refer to children who identify with a gender identity other than the one they were assigned at birth. This includes young people with binary and non-binary gender identities.

REFERENCES

- Airton, L. (2009). From sexuality (gender) to gender (sexuality): The aims of anti-homophobia education. *Sex Education, 9*(2), 129–139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681810902829505>
- Allred, P. (2018). Sites of good practice: How do education, health and youth work spaces shape sex education? In F. Sanjakdar, & A. Yip (Eds.), *Critical pedagogy, sexuality education, and young people* (pp. 83–98). Peter Lang.
- Allred, P., & Fox, N. (2019). Assembling citizenship: Sexualities education, micropolitics and the becoming-citizen. *Sociology, 53*(4), 689–706. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038518822889>
- Allen, L. (2011). *Young people and sexuality education: Rethinking key debates*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Allen, L. (2018). Reconceptualising homophobia: By leaving ‘those kids’ alone. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 41*(3), 441–453. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2018.1495617>
- Austin, A. (2016). ‘There I am’: A grounded theory study of young adults navigating a transgender or gender non-conforming identity within a context of oppression and invisibility. *Sex Roles, 75*(5–6), 215–230. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-016-0600-7>
- Baldwin, J., & Mead, M. (1971). *A rap on race*. Corgi Books.
- Bay-Cheng, L. Y. (2003). The trouble of teen sex: The construction of adolescent sexuality through school-based sexuality education. *Sex Education, 3*, 61–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1468181032000052162>
- Beckett, H., & Warrington, C. (2015). *Making justice work: Experiences of criminal justice for children and young people affected by sexual exploitation as victims and witnesses*. University of Bedfordshire.
- Biesta, G. (2005). Against learning. Reclaiming a language for education in an age of learning. *Nordisk Pedagogik, 25*, 54–66.
- Boldt, G. (2020). Theorising vitality in the literacy classroom. *Reading Research Quarterly, 1*–15.
- Brady, G., & Lowe, P. (2019). ‘Go on, go on, go on’: Sexual consent, child sexual exploitation and cups of tea. *Children and Society, 34*(1), 78–92. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12358>
- Bragg, S., Renold, E., Ringrose, J., & Jackson, C. (2018). ‘More than boy, girl, male, female’: exploring young people’s views on gender diversity within and beyond school contexts. *Sex Education, 18*(4), 420–434. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2018.1439373>
- Burns, S. C. (2013). The ontology and social construction of childhood in the Caribbean. In A. D. Jones (Ed.), *Understanding child sexual abuse*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137020055_3
- Chase, S. E. (2005). Narrative inquiry: Multiple lenses, approaches, voices. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 651–679). Sage Publications Ltd.
- Clapton, G., Cree, V., & Smith, M. (2012). Moral panics, claims-making and child protection in the UK. *British Journal of Social Work, 43*(4), 803–812. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bct061>
- Coll, L., O’Sullivan, M., & Enright, E. (2018). ‘The trouble with normal’: (Re)imagining sexuality education with young people. *Sex Education, 18*(2), 157–171. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2017.1410699>

- Coll, L., Ollis, D., & O’Keeffe, B. (2020). Rebel becomings: Queer(y)ing school spaces with young people. In H. Sauntson, & J. Kjaran (Eds.), *Schools as queer transformative spaces: Global narratives on genders and sexualities in schools*. Routledge.
- Coy, M., Kelly, L., Elvines, F., Garner, M., & Kanyeredzi, A. (2013). “Sex without consent, I suppose that is rape”: How young people in England understand sexual consent. *Children’s Commissioner’s inquiry into child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups*. Office of the Children’s Commissioner.
- 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. (2019). *Relationships education, relationships and sex education (RSE) and health education*. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2VWQ1zD> Accessed January 25, 2022
- Dernikos, B., Lesko, N., McCall, S., & Niccolini, A. (2020). *Mapping the affective turn in education: Theory, research, and pedagogy*. Routledge.
- Dunn, C. G., Kenney, E., Fleischhacker, S. E., & Bleich, S. N. (2020). Feeding low-income children during the Covid-19 pandemic. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 382(18), 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMP2005638>
- Enke, A. F. (2012). The education of little cis. In A. F. Enke (Ed.), *Transfeminist perspectives in and beyond transgender or gender studies* (pp. 60–77). Temple University Press.
- Fahs, B. (2019). Writing with blood: The transformative pedagogy of teaching students to write manifestos. *Radical Teacher*, 115, 34–38. <https://doi.org/10.5195/rt.2019.639>
- Ferfolja, T., & Ullman, J. (2020). *Gender and sexuality diversity in a culture of limitation: Student and teacher experiences in schools*. Routledge.
- Fields, J. (2004). Same-sex marriage, sodomy laws, and the sexual lives of young people. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 1(11), 11–23. <https://doi.org/10.1525/srsp.2004.1.3.11>
- Fields, J. (2008). *Risky lessons: Sex education and social inequality*. Rutgers University Press.
- Fields, J. (2012). Sexuality education in the United States: Shared cultural ideas across a political divide. *Sociology Compass*, 6(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2011.00436.x>
- Fields, J., & Hirschman, C. (2007). Citizenship lessons in abstinence-only sexuality education. *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, 2(2), 3–25. https://doi.org/10.1300/J455v02n02_02
- Fields, J., & Tolman, D. L. (2006). Risky business: sexuality education and research in U.S. schools. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 3(4), 63–76. <https://doi.org/10.1525/srsp.2006.3.4.63>
- Firmin, C., Warrington, C., & Pearce, J. (2016). Sexual exploitation and its impact on developing sexualities and sexual relationships: The need for contextual social work intervention. *British Journal of Social Work*, 46(8), 2318–2337. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcw134>
- Gardiner, M. (1996). Alterity and ethics: A dialogical perspective. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 13, 121–143. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026327696013002009>
- Gilbert, J. (2017). Contesting consent in sex education. *Sex Education*, 18(3), 268–279. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2017.1393407>
- Gilbert, J., Fields, J., Mamo, L., & Lesko, N. (2018). Intimate possibilities: The beyond bullying project and stories of LGBTQ sexuality and gender in US schools. *Harvard Educational Review*, 88(2), 163–183. <https://doi.org/10.17763/1943-5045-88.2.163>
- Graf, G., & Schweiger, G. (2017). *Ethics and the endangerment of children’s bodies*. Springer International Publishing.
- Hirst, J. (2008). Developing sexual competence? Exploring strategies for the provision of effective sexualities and relationships education. *Sex Education*, 8(4), 399–413. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681810802433929>
- Jones, T. (2011). Saving rhetorical children: Sexuality education discourses from conservative to post-modern. *Sex Education*, 11(4), 369–387. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2011.595229>
- Jones, T., Smith, E., Ward, R., Dixon, J., Hillier, L., & Mitchell, A. (2016). School experiences of transgender and gender diverse students in Australia. *Sex Education*, 16(2), 156–171. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2015.1080678>
- Kehily, M. J. (2002). *Sexuality, gender and schooling: Shifting agendas in social learning*. Routledge.
- Kehily, M. J., & Nayak, A. (2017). Global assemblages of sexuality education. In L. Allen, & M. L. Rasmussen (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of sexuality education*. Macmillan.

- Lefevre, M., Hickle, K., & Luckock, B. (2019). 'Both/and' not 'either/or': Reconciling rights to protection and participation in working with child sexual exploitation. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 49(7), 1837–1855. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcy106>
- Lloyd, J. (2018). Abuse through sexual image sharing in schools: Response and responsibility. *Gender and Education*, 32(6), 784–802. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2018.1513456>
- Lloyd, J., Walker, J., & Firmin, C. (2020). Keeping children safe? Advancing social care assessments to address harmful sexual behaviour in schools. *Child and Family Social Work*, 25(4), 751–760. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12751>
- Ludema, J., & Fry, R. (2008). The practice of appreciative inquiry. In P. Reason, & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice*, 2nd ed. (pp. 280–296). SAGE.
- MacInnis, C., & Portelli, J. P. (2002). Dialogue as research. *Journal of Thought*, 37(2), 33–44.
- Mayes, E. (2016). Shifting research methods with a *becoming-child* ontology: Co-theorising puppet production with high school students. *Childhood*, 23(1), 105–122.
- Mayes, E. (2019). The mis/uses of 'voice' in (post) qualitative research with children and young people: Histories, politics and ethics. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 32(10), 1191–1209.
- McBride, R.-S. (2020). A literature review of the secondary school experiences of trans youth. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 18(2), 103–134. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2020.1727815>
- McBride, R.-S., & Neary, A. (2021). Trans and gender diverse youth resisting cisnormativity in school. *Gender and Education*, 33(8), 1090–1107. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2021.1884201>
- Meyer, E. J., & Leonardi, B. (2018). Teachers' professional learning to affirm transgender, non-binary, and gender-creative youth: experiences and recommendations from the field. *Sex Education*, 18(4), 449–463. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2017.1411254>
- Meyer, E. J., Tilland-Stafford, A., & Airton, L. (2016). Transgender and gender-creative students in PK–12 schools: What we can learn from their teachers. *Teachers College Record*, 118(8), 1–50.
- Miller, S. J. (2016). Trans* + ing classrooms: The pedagogy of refusal as mediator for learning. *Social Sciences*, 5(34), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci5030034>
- Mills, T., Strom, K., & Abrams, L. (2020). More-than critical friendship: A posthuman analysis of subjectivity and practices in neoliberal work spaces. In C. Edge, A. Cameron-Standerford, & B. Bergh (Eds.), *Textiles and tapestries: Self-study for envisioning new ways of knowing: Castle conference 2020*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from https://edtechbooks.org/castle_conference_2020/
- Neary, A. (2018). New trans* visibilities: Working the limits and possibilities of gender at school. *Sex Education*, 18(4), 435–448. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2017.1419950>
- Neary, A. (2021). Trans children and the necessity to complicate gender in primary schools. *Gender and Education*, 33(8), 1073–1089. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2021.1884200>
- Ollis, D., Coll, L., Harrison, L., & Johnson, B. (Forthcoming 2022). Pedagogies of possibility for negotiating sexuality education with young people. *Emerald Studies in Gender, Sexuality and Education*. ISBN: 9781787697447.
- Pearce, J. (2013). A social model of 'abused consent'. In M. Melrose, & J. Pearce (Eds.), *Critical perspectives on child sexual exploitation and related trafficking*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Quinlivan, K. (2018). *Exploring contemporary issues in sexuality education with young people*. Palgrave MacMillan.
- Renold, E. (2018). 'Feel what I feel': Making da(r)ta with teen girls for creative activism: on how sexual violence matters. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 27(1), 37–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2017.1296352>
- Renold, E. (2019). Ruler-skirt risings: Becoming crafty with how gender and sexuality education research-activisms can come to matter. In T. Jones, L. Coll, & Y. Taylor (Eds.), *Up-lifting gender & sexuality study in education and research* (pp. 1–26). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Renold, E. J., Ashton, M., & McGeeney, E. (2021). What if?: becoming response-able with the making and mattering of a new relationships and sexuality education curriculum. *Professional Development in Education*, 47(2–3), 538–555. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2021.1891956>
- Renold, E. J., Edwards, V., & Huuki, T. (2020). Becoming eventful: making the 'more-than' of a youth activist conference matter. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 25(3), 441–464. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569783.2020.1767562>

- Renold, E., & McGeeney, E. (2017). *Informing the future of the Sex and Relationships Education Curriculum in Wales*. Cardiff University.
- Riggs, D. W., & Bartholomaeus, C. (2018). Transgender young people's narratives of intimacy and sexual health: Implications for sexuality education. *Sex Education, 18*(4), 376–390.
- Ringrose, J., & Renold, E. (2010). Normative cruelties and gender deviants: The performative effects of bully discourses for girls and boys in school. *British Educational Research Journal, 36*, 573–596. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920903018117>
- Robinson, K. (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>
- Romero, N. (2018). Toward a critical unschooling pedagogy. *Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning, 12*(23), 56–71.
- Sanjakdar, F., & A. Yip (Eds.) (2018). *Critical pedagogy, sexuality education, and young people*. Peter Lang.
- Scottish Government. (2018). *LGBTI Inclusive Education Working Group: Report to the Scottish Ministers*. The Scottish Government.
- Spyrou, S. (2019). An ontological turn for childhood studies? *Children and Society, 33*(4), 316–323. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12292>
- Spyrou, S. (2020). Children as future-makers. *Childhood, 27*(1), 3–7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568219884142>
- Stryker, R., Boddy, J., Bragg, S., & Sims-Schouten, W. (2019). The future of childhood studies and *Children & Society*. *Children & Society, 33*(4), 301–308. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12345>
- United Nations Population Fund. (2018). *International technical guidance on sexuality education*. UNESCO. Retrieved from <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/international-technical-guidance-sexuality-education>
- Waites, M. (2004). Age of consent and sexual consent. In M. Cowling, & P. Reynolds (Eds.), *Making sense of sexual consent* (pp. 73–92). Ashgate.
- Welsh Government. (2017). *the future of the sex and relationships education curriculum in wales: Recommendations of the sex and relationships education expert panel*. Welsh Government.
- Whittington, E. (2019). Co-producing and navigating consent in participatory research with young people. *Journal of Children's Services, 14*(3), 205–216. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCS-02-2019-0007>
- Whittington, E. (2021). Rethinking consent with continuums: Sex ethics and young people. *Sex Education, 21*(4), 480–496. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2020.1840343>
- Whittington, E., & Thomson, R. (2018). Education for consent: Beyond the binary. In F. Sanjakdar, & A. Yip (Eds.), *Critical pedagogy, sexuality education and young people: Issues about democracy and active citizenry* (pp. 49–64). Peter Lang.
- Wyness, M. (2015). *Childhood*. Polity Press.
- Youdell, D. (2004). Wounds and reinscriptions: Schools, sexualities and performative subjects. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 25*(4), 477–493.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Dr Catherine Atkinson is a Lecturer at the Manchester Institute of Education. Her research and teaching are both concerned with issues of in/equity in education, with a particular focus on gender, sexualities and childhood(s). Her current research is interested in exploring both the possibilities and limits of contemporary gender and sexualities 'equalities' initiatives, as well as in troubling normative conceptualisations of agency, power and participation in childhood research.

Dr Leanne Coll is an Assistant Professor at Dublin City University. Her research focuses on the potentials of co-productive, creative and action-orientated methodologies and transformative pedagogical approaches to sexualities, social justice and schooling. A key driver in her work is her passion for and dedication to working with rather than for young people to carve a new order of experience in relationships and sexualities education.

Dr Ruari-Santiago McBride contributed to this piece while in the position of Irish Research Council Fellow and Marie Curie Fellow based at the School of Education, University of Limerick. During this Fellowship, Ruari collaborated with Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI) on a research project focused on transgender and gender diverse youth's secondary school experience. Ruari's research foci oscillate between feminist, queer and trans theory, abolition politics and critical education.

Dr Elsie Whittington is a Research Fellow at the Safer Young Lives Research Centre at the University of Bedfordshire. Elsie's research focuses on understanding the complexity of sexual consent and possibilities for a more ethical understanding of competence-building and sexual negotiation. Elsie prioritises youth-led and participatory research methods and advocates the importance of informal education and youth work.

Dr Francesca Zanatta lectures and researches at the Education and Communities Department at UEL. Their current research focuses on developing transformative Children's Rights Education pedagogies for practitioners and educators. Fran's research aims to problematise traditional theoretical frameworks of childhood, gender and identity. Fran is currently training as child psychotherapist to explore new ways of working with children on matters of relevance to their identities.

How to cite this article: Atkinson C, Coll L, McBride R-S, Whittington E, Zanatta F. Growing sideways: Re-articulating ontologies of childhood within/through relationships and sexuality education (RSE). *Child Soc.* 2022;00:1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12535>