

Sexuality education and religion: From dialogue to conversation

Abstract

The relationship between sexuality education and religion is often framed antagonistically, especially when it comes to tensions between the teaching of sexuality education and the priorities of some religious communities. In this paper, we argue that this antagonism can be structured as much by the prevalent forms of engagement that display it (dialogue and debate), as it is by the antagonism between contrasting ethical systems. While we acknowledge the importance of debate and dialogue in the public sphere, we contend that appeals to these discursive forms in schools and classrooms can limit possibilities for rethinking engagements across sexuality education and religion. This is because of the tendency within certain manifestations of dialogue (for example, dialogical models connected to liberal political projects) to err on the side of predictability, rationality, and abstraction. To address some of these limits, we draw on the recent turn to conversation in educational thinking. We think through the significance of conversation in offering a mode of engagement for students, teachers, and school communities that is conditioned by the dispossession of the self, and is attuned to the unpredictable, affective, and contextual landscapes of shared encounters. We conclude with some thoughts on the practical implications of conversation for rethinking the role of the sexuality education teacher, practices of parental consultation, and processes of policy enactment in schools.

Key words

Sexuality education; religion; dialogue; conversation; interruption.

Introduction

In recent times, developments in sexuality education in the context of the United Kingdom (UK) have received much reaction from religious communities, a lot of which has been negative. In January 2019, for example, revised UK government guidance on sexuality education was met with opposition by some members of the UK's Ultra-Orthodox Jewish community, specifically because of the exploration of LGBTQ+ themes. The lawyers of Shraga Stern, an Ultra-Orthodox activist, wrote to the Secretary of State for Education at the time to express the view that many 'members of the [Ultra-Orthodox] community would choose to leave the United Kingdom for a more hospitable jurisdiction rather than comply with such an obligation to mention homosexuality or gender reassignment in a positive context at school' (Sherwood 2019). Anxieties around sexuality education (and, in particular, the exploration of LGBTQ+ issues within this) came to a head in the UK again later in the same year, with protests organised by majority Muslim parents outside Parkfield Community School in Birmingham. These protests featured banners with slogans such as 'Say no to promoting homosexuality and LGBT ways of life to our children' and 'Stop exploiting children's innocence' (Parveen 2019). Shabana Mahmood, representing Birmingham Ladywood as a Member of Parliament for the Labour Party, reiterated these concerns in a House of Commons debate on the matter, arguing that Muslim parents' anxieties around LGBTQ+ issues in Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) were less about homophobia or transphobia, and more about the appropriateness of exploring such topics with young children in the context of their religious backgrounds (Parveen 2019). While we refer here in our introduction to 'RSE' which is the term for sexuality education in the English context, in the

remainder of the paper we use the term ‘sexuality education’ to designate a broader practice relevant to other national contexts.

The interplay between religion and the exploration of LGBTQ+ themes in education (both within sexuality education and outside it) has been a significant feature of educational research in the last decade. Indeed, several voices have documented the antagonisms that often play out at the interface between religion, sexuality and gender in education, with religion being positioned as inimical to educational approaches that affirm sexual and gender diversity (De Palma and Jennett, 2010, Allen et al., 2014; Neary, Gray and O’Sullivan, 2018; Newman et al., 2018; Kitching, 2022). This has been particularly the case in research on Catholic education, with many scholars foregrounding how affirmative educational approaches to sexual and gender diversity are often stymied by pressures on Catholic schools (both internal and external) to defer to heteronormative doctrines around sexual and gender expression (Grace and Wells, 2005; Love and Tosolt, 2013; Neary, 2013, 2017; Callaghan, 2016, Bailey, 2017; Farrelly, O’Higgins Norman and O’Leary, 2017). These perspectives are supported further by research that has foregrounded the view among young people that affirming sexual and gender diversity is difficult, if not impossible, when schooling and religion meet (Page and Yip, 2012; Martino and Cumming-Potwin, 2016), a belief also prevalent among teachers (Allen et al. 2014) and wider school staff (Newman et al., 2018).

Religious resistances to exploring issues of sexual and gender diversity in the specific context of sexuality education have been leveraged through a number of ways, including through the use of strategies (both liberal and conservative) that foreground the rights of parents to determine the education of their children (Bialystok, 2018; Nash and Browne, 2021). This kind of resistance is often built on approaches that decry the involvement of secular, state-sponsored schools in the personal lives of religious families, e.g. Muslim families (Sanjakdar, 2016; Sanjakdar and Yip, 2018). Within such frameworks, schools (and the teachers and other personnel who work in them) are often understood at variance to the family, lest they complement the role of parents and what students learn at home (Department of Education, 2019). In this sense, the work of teachers is positioned either in tandem with, or in opposition to, the (religious/secular) desires of parents.

This research context notwithstanding, several voices have offered perspectives that seek to trouble an oppositional framing of religion and sexuality in education, seeing constructive, nuanced and collaborative engagements within and across religious and secular communities as being both desirable and possible (De Palma and Jennett 2010; Newman et al., 2018; Taylor and Cuthbert, 2019). Some have pointed to the precedence for this kind of work given the ample opportunities some children have had in exploring LGBTQ+ issues in school (Hackman, 2002; Barozzi and Ojeda, 2014). Others, like Falconer and Taylor (2017) and Taylor and Cuthbert (2019), have attended to the positive role religion has played in supporting LGBTQ+ youth in school contexts, a point also made by Carlile (2020) in her focus on how teachers broaching issues of sexual and gender diversity in school sometimes draw from their own faith traditions, as well as from the religious traditions of their school communities, to empower them in their work. This appeal to theology and religion as a basis for engaging in educational work that is affirming of sexual and gender diversity has echoes in the scholarship of Kamrudin (2018), Nadar and van Klinken (2018), Seedat (2018), and Yip (2018), all of whom have reflected on the possibilities of integrating LGBTQ+ religious perspectives and traditions in the context of higher and adult/community-based religious education settings. Herriot and Callaghan (2019), Henry (2018, 2020, 2021, 2022), Burke (2021), and Davis (2021) have similarly pointed to the queer and trans inclusive resources available to (sex) education from within particular theological and religious traditions, while

Heyes (2022) has offered broader reflections on the synergies between sexuality education and various conceits of political theology. Finally, Mirvis (2018) has pointed to the growth in inclusive guidance on sexuality education for Orthodox Jewish schools, while others like Blum (2010) have emphasised how the internal diversity of Islam allows for more spacious, less antagonistic, approaches to sexuality to emerge.

A small contingent of scholars within this affirmative space have pointed to the value of dialogue in navigating questions of religion, sexuality, and difference, and it is in cognisance of these that this paper arises. Scholars like Halstead and Lewicka (1998) and Merry (2005), while in disagreement with one another in certain respects, are largely united in framing the intersections between religion, sexuality, and education in liberal terms, positioning critical, dialogical engagements with issues of sexuality and gender for Muslim students as key to the commitments of liberal education in democratic and multicultural societies. Huchting and Fisher (2019) make a similar case for Catholic education, seeing dialogue as central for fostering the conditions for ‘genuine openness, listening and transforming’ (p. 3) that are needed for navigating the terrain between religion, sexuality and gender in more productive, less hostile, terms. This dialogical emphasis is repeated by McDonough (2016) in his reflections on the viability of gay-straight alliances in Christian school contexts: McDonough sees dialogue, among other themes, as central for education in exposing and building on the internal diversities that exist within church traditions. This turn to dialogue echoes wider developments within multicultural educational projects, where dialogue is construed as a process through which we come to consensus (for instance, in the face of conflict) and build solutions that serve the interests of the majority (Todd, 2015). In this specific sense, dialogue is likened to liberal political projects that frame democratic decision-making as a matter of deliberative exchange (see Habermas and others).

Pulling the different threads of this literature together, what brings us to this paper is an interest in particular modes of engagement that might allow for the antagonism between religion, sexuality and gender to be navigated more productively in the context of sexuality education. By ‘modes of engagement’, we refer to specific approaches that people often adopt in interacting with each other across religious, sexual, and gender differences. For some, debate or argumentation might be positioned as the most appropriate mode for engaging with these issues in sexuality education, where students, teachers, parents and other school stakeholders engage in a kind of intellectual jousting with each other, vying for the most robust, rational, and coherent position to ‘win out’, so to speak. Indeed, we often see this in popular media accounts that document religious and social differences playing out in education. For others, liberal dialogue might be positioned as more desirable for mitigating conflict and building common ground across varying religious, sexual, and gender identities.

As we detail below, our dissatisfaction with these ways of framing potential engagements across religious, sexual and gender difference is threefold. Firstly, argumentative and liberal dialogical models risk eliding the productive possibilities offered by our affective lives. In other words, practices of argumentation and liberal dialogue are often quite rational, where an appeal to the complex emotional and contextual factors informing people’s religious and ethical stances is positioned as more contaminating to the engagement than productive. This, we feel, is unhelpful as our emotional and contextual landscapes offer much in shaping our relationships with others in more receptive, less defensive, terms. Secondly, argumentative and liberal dialogical modes of engagement around issues of religion, sexuality, gender, and sexuality education can often pay insufficient attention to the nature of education itself: they can assume that the work of teachers and schools is tied to the *preservation* of particular identities, ethical claims and parental/student

desires, rather than, say, to the *interruption* of these. Finally, argumentative and liberal dialogical modes of engagement are often goal-oriented (whether that be in terms of reaching consensus, mitigating conflict, etc) and in this way risk closing off the sense of the unpredictable that necessarily comes through our encounters with those who are different to us. Over the course of the paper to follow, we elaborate on these claims more fully, with the view to highlighting the role *conversation* might play in reframing modes of engagement at the interface between religion, sexuality, gender, and sexuality education. As mentioned, we focus on conversation as an alternative to argumentative and liberal dialogical models specifically, conscious of the fact that other accounts of dialogue exist that, while beyond the scope of this paper, may also be complementary to a conversational model.

Drawing on the works of Todd (2015) and Bojesen (2019), we suggest that conversation offers distinctive possibilities for productively working through antagonisms across religion, sexuality, gender, and sexuality education as there is a generative, unpredictable quality to conversation that affords opportunities for teachers, parents, students, and wider school communities to navigate difference in ways that are less about preserving *what* I am and *what* I say, think, or believe, and more about being receptive to *who* the other is. We conclude with some notes on the implications of these perspectives on how we understand teachers, parents, and processes of policy enactment in school sexuality education spaces.

Conversation as distinct from dialogue

Conversation has been a significant theme in philosophical engagements with education for some time. O'Donnell (2012), for instance, has positioned conversation as helpful for education in affording opportunities for people to think collectively with one another ('in concert'). Cullen (2017) has made similar arguments in the context of religious education, seeing conversation as paradigmatic of the hermeneutical nature of encounters with religion in educational contexts. Williams and Williams (2017) have also written about conversation, seeing 'pedagogies of conversation' as valuable for decentring students 'from individual and cultural mindsets' (p. 254), and opening them 'to the challenge of better argument' (p. 262). Oakeshott's (1962) concept of 'the conversation of mankind' has been taken up in comparable terms, with many, like Alexander (2015) and Bakhurst and Fairfield (2016), framing conversation as a metaphor for liberal learning and personal development.

Others have engaged with the concept of conversation in order to distinguish it from practices of dialogue, and it is in these terms that conversation is of particular interest to us. Todd (2015), for example, distinguishes conversation from dialogue in order to think through how best to understand engagements with difference in educational contexts. What makes Todd's critique of dialogue relevant to us is her focus on liberal dialogical models often appealed to in multicultural educational projects. One criticism that Todd raises about liberal dialogical models are their limits in the specific emotional contexts of classroom life. She writes of how classrooms, because of their 'highly emotive, raw, and affectively charged' character, 'are far more and far less than these models of democracy allow' (pp. 59-60). In this sense, she sees liberal dialogical approaches to education (where solutions to conflict are deliberated in a manner almost akin to parliamentary political processes), as simply smoothing over the tensions and conflicts that can arise through diversity work. In light of this, Todd positions such models as 'untenable', and turns instead to conversation as a mode of engagement through which we can 'invite an openness into our encounters with others, where youth are allowed to be vulnerable, and where the possibilities of violence and non-violence arise.' (p. 60). This openness in conversation is afforded through conversation's

responsiveness to the unpredictability of living with others, in all its affective complexity. For Todd, this sets conversation apart from the goal-oriented nature of liberal dialogical models:

Conversation rarely has a specified aim, as dialogue does; it instead invites each partner into a space where ideas are introduced, sometimes passionately defended, and spin off each other. It might not be the case that something is ‘decided’, and it definitely might be the case that the talk wanders, takes detours, and gets embroidered with the loose threads of life. (p. 60)

While dialogue for Todd is ‘a teleological practice that always has one eye on a future outcome’, conversations are, by contrast, ‘eminently concerned not with rules of legitimacy or pre-manufactured goals, but with the kind of attention to the present in which that conversation takes place’ (p. 60). In this way, conversations, for us, are characterised less by their content (they can be ‘serious’ as well as ‘playful’ or ‘lighthearted’), or by a set of abstract ‘rules’ to follow, and more by how they proceed in relation to a set of aims or outcomes.

Like Todd, Standish contrasts conversation with dialogue, though in his case with explicit sensitivity to what happens to the identities of those who engage with each other. He criticises the tendency of dialogue to ‘leave the subjectivities [of those engaged in dialogue] too secure in themselves, related too contingently to the thoughts that they exchange’ (2016, p. 122). Put differently, dialogue for Standish is characterised by the subject being kept largely intact in the encounter between interlocutors: unlike conversation, dialogue is predicated on the impulse to affirm or rework one’s position, identity, or set of priorities, in a manner that is systematic and conclusive. In this sense, we are reminded of the religious parent, engaging in dialogue with the view to safeguarding the religious identity of their child, or of the secular school administrator who dialogues with those dissenting from LGBTQ+ inclusive sexuality education in order to reaffirm their school’s progressive commitments. Unlike this, in his engagement with Cavell’s work Standish suggests that conversation ‘requires that I do not seek to shore up my own identity but rather am ready for new possibility – that is, ready to become (2016, p. 123).’ For rethinking engagements with difference in the context of sexuality education, what is valuable in Standish’s account is his commitment to framing conversation in terms of a sensitivity to the potentially destabilising effects of our encounters with others, in other words in the capacity of conversation to interrupt identity, to expose us to experiences and perspectives that unsettle one’s sense of individuality, who we are and what we value and desire.

However, one limit to Standish’s distinction between conversation and dialogue is that Standish still largely frames conversation in terms of its affordances for the subject’s self-discovery or becoming. Bojesen (2019) takes this up when he writes: ‘While Standish is concerned with subjectivities being too secure in themselves and shoring up their identity, he nonetheless seems primarily concerned with what an individual person can take from a conversation’ (p. 653). Here, Bojesen identifies semblances in Standish’s work between dialogue and conversation: like dialogue, conversation gains its significance for Standish in terms of what it offers the subject, which has the effect of sustaining the subject’s unity and coherence (even in moments of disagreement or rebuttal). Against such an approach, Bojesen prioritises the speech of the other within his understanding of conversation, and in particular the capacity of conversation to dispossess the self of its stable ground. We find this emphasis particularly helpful for rethinking the interface between religion and sexuality education, so we spend some time on it here.

Bojesen's account of conversation distances itself from practices of dialogue and debate. For Bojesen, conversation is grounded in conditions of infinity and strangeness, from which interlocutors engage with each other without annexing the other within the domain of the 'I', as a 'thing' to be owned, studied, persuaded, recognised or otherwise identified with (p. 655). On this meaning, conversation gains its distinctiveness in 'the movement of thought' it engenders, which for Bojesen refers to the capacity of conversation (and, in particular, the language used in conversation) to orient ideas in unpredictable, non-linear, and potentially transgressive directions. This movement of thought is both characterised and enabled by the sense of the infinite in language, that has important, destabilising effects on the subject. He writes:

Conversation ... can develop a subject but in a manner that destabilises its autonomy through the language that accommodates it. Conversation is radically decentering in the sense that the subject is formed through the movement of language. Rather than being able to possess language, the subject is possessed (or, perhaps, dispossessed) by language. Conversation forms but also deforms and dissolves identity, putting it always on the move. To find oneself in conversation is also to lose oneself in conversation. (p. 652)

On our interpretation, Bojesen is suggesting here that when we engage in conversation with others we are exposed to the unwieldiness of language itself, an unwieldiness of movement and direction that *interrupts* efforts to frame our exchanges with others in terms of what 'I' determine, desire, or seek to assert. Indeed, when we converse with others (for instance, in a classroom setting), we rarely know where we will 'end up', for the speech of the other can never be boxed within what I alone can anticipate or desire. Rather, our exchanges are already shaped by complex emotional and contextual factors, histories, and experiences that supersede our own limits and wants.

It is this 'infinite', 'strange', or 'plural' quality, to use Bojesen's turn of phrase, that conditions conversation in ways that are different to how argumentative and liberal dialogical encounters are often approached. This is important for us, as antagonisms arising from dialogical engagements in and around sexuality education are too often exacerbated by a desire to determine where the engagement will 'end', for example, in terms of a reaffirmation of one's religious identity or set of convictions. Furthermore, conversation's capacity to 'deform and dissolve identity' is helpful in sidestepping appeals to identity that often characterise tensions at the interface between religion and sexuality education. Indeed, conversation is a productive mode of engagement for us as it foregrounds the interruptive role that education plays in exposing us to experiences that displace our attachments to ourselves, our identities and institutions. Biesta writes the following in describing education:

I am, however, avoiding certain other words and concepts, most notably the notion of identity – which for me has more to do with the ways in which we identify with existing orders and traditions than with ways of acting and being that are 'outside' this – and also the notion of individuality – which tends to depict the human subject too much in isolation from other human beings. (2013, p. 18)

By interrupting the bounds of our own egos, the educational encounter grants us access to new ways of relating (of being, acting, feeling, and relating) in this world with the potential to transcend the limits of already existing social structures and discourses. In this sense, education exposes what we desire to what is *desirable* for others (Biesta, 2013): it creates the conditions for us to set our own priorities aside and to engage out of responsiveness to the other, 'in the present' as Todd would say. This is why conversation as a mode of

self-dispossession is significant for us: it introduces a mode of engagement to the religion-sexuality-education nexus that allows antagonistic relationships at this interface to be interrupted as a condition or starting point from which students, teachers, and wider school communities engage with each other, rather than as an end goal to be inevitably realised. And while such self-dispossession might well be codified by teachers and other school personnel (in the context of a set of curriculum aims, for example) our interest in doing so would be secondary.

To avoid forwarding our point too heavy-handedly, however, this is not to suggest that practices of liberal dialogue or argument should not have *any* place in teaching about sexuality. We turn to conversation not in an effort to negate the potential educational significances of dialogue and argument in and of themselves, but rather to suggest that there are other, perhaps more expansive and generative, modes of engagement worth attending to (and even prioritising) in thinking about how best to educationally engage with difference as it pertains to the distinctive tensions at play between religion and sexuality education. However, we read this as a more fundamental condition for this work – it's a starting point rather than an end goal. While it might well be codified as an aim as well, our interest in doing so is secondary. Working with this conversational framework, in what follows we map its significance for understanding the practical work of teachers in navigating differences at the interface between religion and sexuality education, and in rethinking the relationship between the school, the home, and processes of school policy enactment in the sexuality education space.

Some practical implications

Role of the teacher

For teachers, thinking with conversation as a framework for their practice potentially troubles some of the spoken and unspoken rules for engagement often at play in sexuality education classrooms. Whilst dialogical approaches place a high value on principles, such as turn-taking (Mondada, 2013), conversation makes space for the conditional breakage of such rules. In conversation, interruption can be initiated and experienced in several different ways – as an expression of interest by the interrupter that is potentially, though not necessarily, experienced as such by the conversation partner. This is part of the inherent 'riskiness' of a conversational approach and its power to interrupt identities.

Conversation provides us with tools for thinking about interruption that are highly pertinent to some particular challenges of sexuality education classrooms. One challenge a teacher might face is in how to understand their role in navigating conversations with students, and the extent to which they are able to participate in such conversations. Teachers are often professionally required to 'manage' the behaviour of students in a school environment, including preventing the use of offensive language. For example, if a student *begins* to offer a contribution that the teacher, with their conversational senses attuned, knows is developing into a bigoted, unhelpful, offensive comment aimed either towards a particular religious tradition or towards a particular sexual identity that may hurt some other students in the room, they are faced with a complex and charged decision of whether to intervene, how to intervene and how quickly to intervene. Under a dialogical model, the teacher's intervention could be imagined to be the enforcing of an abstracted rule ('we do not allow offensive comments'). But conversations do not work like this – rules are agreed tacitly and if they are enforced it may be done organically and in reference to one's personal preferences rather than abstractly in reference to a codified set of expectations (e.g. 'I don't like it when you use that word'). Could we imagine, for example, a teacher saying something like 'I don't like it when

you use that word’ or ‘how do we think it affects people when we use this language?’, rather than ‘that word is not permitted’? How might this approach and the thinking behind it sit in relation to the wider patterns and tendencies of how religion is framed in sexuality education discourses?

Religious beliefs, traditions and identities appear within a range of sexuality education discourses as constrained by dialogical rules based on democratic principles. The democratic languages of ‘inclusion’ or ‘sensitivity’ (Sell & Reiss, 2021) in relation to religion operate as the abstracted dialogical rules that a conversational model calls into question. While inclusion and sensitivity offer useful resources for thinking about classroom practice, their grounding in abstracted institutionalised authority distant from the immediate affective context of the classroom carries some limitations. Such approaches run the risk of dehumanising the potentially productive and enriching tensions within sexuality and religion, keeping the ‘rules’ of discourse focused on, for example, allowing all ‘voices’ to be heard (for a critique see Fielding, 2007). In the classroom, the rules and principles of the dialogical approach fall within this broader remit. In the above small, somewhat superficial, but demonstrative example, the teacher opts for a conversational approach that leads the student to consider the affective impact of a certain way of speaking on a *person* within a specific context, rather than as a violation of ‘the rules’ as expressions of the institution of the school or wider forces. Instead, what the student desires is being confronted by *the teacher/other students’ personal desires*: an act of interruption, if you will, through which what is desired becomes desirable for others. This example shows how a conversational mode of interruption differs from a dialogical one and how it sets the affective dynamics of the sexuality education classroom differently when invoking sensitive resonances with religious beliefs. A conversational approach to interruption in teaching could form part of a shift from an engagement with *ideas and institutions* to an engagement with *people and their desires*, exposing students’ engagements with others beyond the realm of abstract moral codes to the flesh-and-blood realities of other people. When applied more widely and in concert with principles of inclusion and sensitivity, we suggest that, within a conversational mode, students might help humanise religious beliefs, attitudes and practices around sexuality leading to greater relational possibilities. This has the potential to affect, for example, the possibilities of how sexuality education can support religious young people to engage with forms and expressions of sexuality they might find difficult or uncomfortable, and to help non-religious young people to engage more sensitively and responsively with religious beliefs and practices around sexuality.

Relationship between school and household

Conversational approaches also call into question some of the assumptions and stereotypes regarding how the relationship between school and home affects and constrains the practice of sexuality education. This is particularly pertinent regarding religious issues, as it is frequently parents that are at the centre of opposition. Research has shown that the power, opinions and actions of parents can reinforce the sense of sexuality education as ‘risky’ and can create fear and anxiety amongst school staff (Anastacio, Carvalho & Clément, 2005). In particular, the figure of the ‘religious parent’ is one that carries great significance in sexuality education discourses – it is assumed that religious parents’ will be the ones most sensitive and critical to progressive sexuality education reform, and media discourses frequently reify this trope (Sanjakdar, 2021). One framing of the school/home relationship that has come under significant critique in educational research literature is the model of ‘parent as consumer’, framed as an unpleasant side effect of the marketization of education (Olmedo & Wilkins, 2017). In sexuality education discourse, the ‘parent as consumer’ discourse

combines with the figure of the 'religious parent' to assemble arguments for reducing the power of parents over sexuality education policies as part of a broader agenda of reversing marketization (Ferfolja, 2010). The democratic grounding of the dialogical approach contains within it the seeds of challenging the claims of parents, because of the primary importance attributed to preparing students to participate in a tolerant society (Carr, 2004).

The 'parent as consumer' model is a useful starting point for discussion of how a conversational approach might enrich processes of parental consultation on sexuality education, particularly in contexts where religious beliefs and practices are prevalent. Unfortunately, there is a distinct lack of research into processes of parental consultation, such that our account here is based on anecdotal experience of such consultancies in the UK context. A common way that consultations proceed is for the school to first present 'here is what we will teach and how we will teach it' and parents then get a chance to respond. Both parents and teachers might come to the consultation with a 'position' that they need to make clear, reinforce and agree upon, or a set of 'outcomes' that they need to achieve through the dialogical process of consultation. However, we argue that this approach runs the risk of reinforcing assumptions of conflict and opposition, especially in communities with high levels of religious observance. The dialogical approach, in which the outlining of the schools' 'position' is the basis of the consultation, may lead to parents relating to the school *as an institution* rather than something that gathers *people* into a certain set of social relations.

How might a conversational approach to consultation differ? First, the conversational model necessarily creates space for the 'positions' that different parties might bring to the consultation to be mutually interrogated. While conversations may be entered with tacit 'goals', the conversational model, grounded as it is in 'infinity and strangeness' creates the possibility for uncertainty and contestability to be introduced regarding these aims. Insofar as it may *be informed by*, but does not *prioritise*, the achievement of a specific set of propositions or goals (as dialogue does), conversation puts identity at risk by moving beyond the desire to assert fixed positions, opinions, or goals.

An alternative approach might be for the consultation to proceed as a series of conversations with smaller groups of parents and teachers. Teachers could be prepared to discuss the school's policy, curriculum and approach, but 'getting these across' would not be the main aim of the session. Insofar as these conversations would be intended to humanise the issues and discuss tensions and difficulties in a responsive and equitable context, this 'goal' is sidelined in favour of an authentic engagement with the 'movement of thought' that conversation about sexuality education engenders in the consultancy setting. These might include new ways of thinking and speaking about sexuality, religion and education that are produced in the more 'chaotic' encounter of the conversational mode. In the same way that conversation is more attuned to the riskiness of sexuality education from the perspective of teaching, so conversation also embraces the riskiness of the school/home relationship. In this sense, consultation becomes an opportunity, less for setting ambitions or limits on the development of a school policy, curriculum, or approach, and more for building the conditions for parents, community members, and school staff to be exposed to one another, to face the fact of their relationships with each other, and to explore how these relationships might shape their collective work together moving forward. These smaller, conversational kinds of consultation might stand a greater chance of eliciting personal narration, drawing out and interrupting personal experiences and desires, rather than just explanation and argumentation.

One consequence of a conversational model might be that parents' desires regarding what their students might encounter in a sexuality education lesson need to be placed

alongside the desires of the school, its staff and the wider networks of relational obligation they exist within, exposing *all* to possibilities of interruption that are so crucial for education. This emphasis on interrupting *desire*, as above, functions to humanise the process of consultation rather than abstract it out to some imagined conflict of institutions and ideologies. Equally, the conversational mode might require the school to engage both with parents' concerns and the human lives and experiences from which those concerns (which might initially appear as combative) arise. While the conversational approach does not expect that these tensions will disappear, it humanises them, providing an alternative 'movement of thought' to the combative framing of sexuality and religion issues in terms of ideas and institutions with entrenched positions. This may enable both religious and non-religious parents as well as teachers and school leaders to come into closer contact with the human realities behind issues of sexuality and religion to build a more engaged and attentive school approach to the issues, one focused less on resolving differences, and more on facing and sustaining relationships where differences can be honestly articulated and responded to.

The school sexuality education policy

In addition to teaching and consultation, conversation also represents a potentially innovative and disruptive model of how a sexuality education policy could be formed that constructively addresses the challenges and opportunities emerging from entanglements with religion. Here we focus on policy-making activities of single schools, who are (in both England and other national contexts) required to make their policy on sexuality education publicly available. A typical approach to school sexuality education policy-making means taking an existing curriculum framework and explaining how the school will meet its requirements. This approach suggests that the school has already decided what it will teach and how, and is stating these as intents to be defended and reified rather than inviting engagement. How might we imagine a more conversational approach that engages productively with the confrontations that might be caused by this approach?

A school could structure its sexuality education policy around a series of questions that might form the basis for conversations that could take place in the home, in consultation, or indeed in classrooms. This might begin by stating that the question of 'what makes a good sexuality education?' is by no means closed and should be an ongoing feature of parent/child/school interactions around sexuality. Elaboration on these questions might include, rather than topics to be covered, descriptions of the kinds of *conversation* that might take place around such a question. The question of 'what makes a good sexuality education?' could be elaborated by suggesting conversations including 'how should we include our own beliefs and experience around sexuality?'. Subsequent questions might include, for example, 'what makes a good romantic relationship?'. Elaboration on this could feature - e.g. 'Students may discuss experiences of how technology impacts romantic relationships'. This differs from an approach where the answers of 'what makes a good romantic relationship' are already set out as proposed content.

As explained above, this approach to policy-making centred around open questions aligns more closely with a conversational mode, in which openness to the movement of thought takes precedence over the argumentative entrenchment of ideas. We argue that this approach is more favourable for disrupting assumptions around the oppositionality of religion and sexuality education and introducing all involved to the more complex landscape of desires present within the relationships of parent/teacher/child. Such an understanding of school policy-making is challenging, and further work is needed beyond the sketch we make here for substantiating and testing how this might work in practice.

Conclusion

Over the course of this paper, we have made the case for reframing how difference is navigated at the nexus between religion and sexuality education, calling for modes of engagement that are more conversational, and less dialogical (in the sense of being predictable, abstract, and decontextualised) in quality. We situated this in an affinity to the conditions of ‘infinity’ and ‘strangeness’ that ground conversation, that is to the unpredictable ‘movements of thought’ that arise when we encounter the other in conversation. We explored the rootedness of this in the capacity of conversation to displace identity, which we situated as helpful in highlighting the interruptive work of education itself. Turning to the concrete work of schools, parents, and teachers in the provision of sexuality education, we suggested that reframing religion and sexuality education in conversational terms allows parental consultation and sexuality education policy-enactment processes to engage with social differences less as matters of identitarian, institutional, and ideological positioning, and more as matters of unpredictable and relational possibility. This, we feel, is more valuable in its sensitivity to the complex contextual and affective dynamics that expose and interrupt the desires of students, parents, teachers, and school authorities.

Of course, our suggestions are perhaps easier said than done, particularly when we consider the difficult work required for communities to reach a point where an openness to the unpredictable interruptions of another can be cultivated, thought through, and sustained. Such is the challenge for educators and communities, and the possibility.

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