Children doing gender and sexuality in the primary school: exploring the effects of critical pedagogy

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In recent years, an increasing number of academic, activist and teacher-led initiatives have set out to develop strategies for challenging heteronormativity and homophobia in education (see for example School Champions; Inclusion for All; No Outsiders). However, there is currently a lack of research exploring the potential effects of these efforts on children’s in-school ‘doings’ of gender and sexuality. This paper addresses this gap by drawing on data from ethnographic research conducted in two North East (UK) primary schools previously involved in the 2006-9 No Outsiders project; an action-research project that sought to challenge heteronormative processes through critical pedagogy. Using findings from participant observation, focus groups and storybook-work with children, I demonstrate some of the multiple and contradictory ways in which children negotiated gender and sexuality within two schools wherein critical work around gender and sexualities equality existed as part of the formal curriculum. In so doing, I reveal that despite a school-wide promotion of equality and diversity, children’s in-school doings of ‘girlhood’ ‘boyhood’ and ‘non/heterosexuality’ remained largely contained within rigid frameworks of heteronormativity. In light of this, I consider the efficacy, or otherwise, of current equalities initiatives and the extent to which critical practice can disrupt enduring processes of inequality in education. In closing, I suggest that programmes that celebrate diversity whilst failing to trouble the fixity of gendered and sexual categories may be necessarily limited in the degree of change they can bring about.