DISCURSIVE SILENCES: A CONTENT AND CRITICAL LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE 2014 SRE GUIDANCE FOR ENGLAND AND WALES

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The content, role and place of sex and relationships education (SRE) are under scrutiny in the UK. SRE has been described by Ofsted (2010), among others, as 'weak'. Accounts of the current crisis in SRE provision flourish, with particular attention being paid to the focus on biological aspects of puberty, reproduction and sexually transmitted infections. Conversely, discursive silences persist around issues such as sexual consent and rights, sexual diversity, gender-based partner violence, sexual exploitation, and the influence of pornography in young people's lives (Blake, 2013; Sex Education Forum, 2011). The SRE guidance for England and Wales was updated in January 2014 but the new guidance does not profoundly address these issues. In both previous and updated guidance, fundamental issues around gender, sexuality and diversity remain invisible or only tokenistically addressed. This, despite robust evidence that gender plays a significant role in young people’s expectations and experiences of intimate relationships (Holland, 1998), including violence, exploitation and consent.

In light of recent work which advocates and encourages the use of applied linguistics within work on sexuality and education (Nelson, 2012), we use the analytical frameworks of content analysis and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2001; Lazar, 2005) to investigate these issues, and to systematically examine the linguistic practices which function to construct ideologies and discursive silences around gender and sexuality. This kind of analysis reveals systematic patterns (including absences) in language which cannot be identified through content analysis alone. Identifying these silences contributes to our knowledge about the systematic exclusion of key issues in SRE, including gender, sexuality and diversity. The analysis also reveals that there are tensions and contradictions in the guidance's handling of the issues, for example, an explicit call not to 'promote' sexual orientation counterbalanced with an equally explicit focus on 'the importance' of heterosexual marriage and reproduction. This is potentially confusing for both young people and teachers. The research findings have implications for our understanding of the problems that persist in the updated SRE guidance. We argue that the problems identified through our analysis could perpetuate, rather than challenge, homophobic bullying, gender-based violence and exploitation, and do little to enhance young people's lives more broadly. The findings are intended to make a contribution towards informing future SRE policy and teacher education in England and Wales. It is also hoped that this paper further illustrates some of the contributions that applied linguistics can make to understandings of sexualities and education.