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Rights to the front
Child Rights-based pedagogies in early childhood degrees

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ABSTRACT: As critical pedagogues committed to social justice, in this paper we discuss the theoretical opportunities and challenges of two pedagogical models for the teaching and learning of Children's Rights on early childhood education and care degrees. Our discussion stems from the exploration and analysis of and reflection on the educational cultures, relations and dynamics which inform both our teaching and research practice. In the paper, we analyse the different layers of experiences of both students and educators as co-constructors of pedagogy in the two curricula presented. Through a process of thematic synthesis analysis of the salient features of each curriculum, this paper proposes four shared areas of pedagogical dilemmas. These dilemmas are explored and discussed in relation to their impact to the learning and teaching of Children's Rights on early childhood education & care degree programmes. Drawing on our empirical research and pedagogical reflections, we then propose four aspirational pedagogical features to achieve transformative Children's Rights Education in early childhood education & care degrees.

Keywords: *children's rights, pedagogy, curriculum, higher education*

Introduction

Participation is at the core of democratic pedagogies in Education. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations [UN], 1989) consolidates participation as one of the three pillars of the convention (James & Prout, 1997; Kanyal, 2004; O'Kane, 2003), alongside provision and protection (Habashi et al.

2010). Some authors have argued that provision and protection are regarded as limited to addressing social rights of children (Archard, 1993). Conversely, the concept of participation, for which definitions are multifaceted and fluid, is celebrated as connecting elements of civil and political rights and citizenship (Hart, 1992; Tisdall et al., 2009). Initially associated primarily to the act of consultation (Hart, 2008), and individual decision-making practices (Wyness, 2012), the understanding of participation has expanded to a multidimensional, complex activity requiring dynamic relationships and shared practices (Spyrou, 2011; Theobald et al., 2011).

The ongoing problematisation of both the definition (Tisdall & Punch 2012) and the (under) theorisation of participation (Kjørholt, 2011) has opened up new opportunities for the recognition of unstructured and non-institutional forms of participation (Larkins, 2014). With more emphasis placed on the importance of bringing awareness and understanding of rights in children's everyday realities (Horgan et al., 2016), Children's Rights Education (CRE) has been identified as the crucial 'pathway' (Howe & Covell, 2005) to recognising and enabling children's active citizenries (Lundy & Martínez Sainz, 2018). Jerome's (2018) thoughtful reflections on the delivery and implementation of Human Rights Education (HRE), extends the question of the role of practitioners to the realm of CRE. Unsurprisingly, educators' knowledge (Gillett-Swan & Sargeant, 2018; Jerome, 2018) and/or personal beliefs (Alderson, 2008) have been identified as instrumental in ensuring a meaningful learning experience. As such, the training and nurturing of rights-informed and respecting educators (Lloyd & Hallet, 2010) is recognised an essential component for the meaningful participation and active citizenship of children (Martínez Sainz et al., 2019).

The picture painted thus far might set an expectation for Rights Education (regardless of whether it is framed as children's or human) to feature in educational programmes designed for educators and practitioners operating in the broad field of childhood(s). The reality suggests different. Jerome and colleagues (2015) revealed, in a report conducted for UNICEF and investigating the status of teaching and learning of children's rights in twenty-six nations, that only Scotland had specific requirements for children's/human rights to feature in their initial teacher training programmes. It is therefore of particular importance to open spaces for reflections and discussions on the development and delivery of rights training/curricula for practitioners and educators.

In our work as lecturers on two different early childhood education and care degree programmes, we have common experiences of developing and delivering a dedicated CRE curriculum, aimed at building students' knowledge and understanding of children's rights in research and practice. The two curricula sit within different policy and legal contexts, Ireland and England, and were developed through different theoretical paradigms. Whilst diverse pathways led us to the development and delivery of these curricula in both

instances, students' participation and experiences occupied a central role. As such, we both conducted independent research projects investigating students' experiences of the teaching and learning models in our CRE modules (Long, 2017, 2019; Zanatta, 2020).

In this article we outline some of the narratives discussed in our studies, with the aim of identifying shared experiences, as conceptualised in Dewey (1938), of both educators and students. Through a process of thematic synthesis analysis (van Leeuwen et al., 2019) of these separate sets of investigations, we identify a number of shared opportunities and challenges in the two curricula. These common threads in the teaching and learning experiences are organised in four pedagogical dilemmas: agency, performativity, knowledge and time. In the concluding section of the paper, we develop recommendations for four aspirational features for the development of transformative CRE for early childhood education and care practitioners and educators.

A Children's Rights Education for children and adults alike

Children's Rights Education: A complex picture

With an underpinning paradigm that constructs children as active agents (James & Prout, 1997; Wyness, 2015), Children's Rights Education (CRE) is a pedagogical approach which teaches about, through, and for children's rights. Included in the wider umbrella of 'Civic Education' approaches (Torney-Purta et al., 1999), CRE is a form of Human Rights Education (HRE) which focuses foremost on the teaching and learning about the rights of the child, as articulated in the UNCRC (UN, 1989). Due to its close affiliation to HRE, CRE scholars often refer to and adopt HRE scholarship and practices.

The focus of HRE, and therefore of CRE, has been summarised under three headlines: knowledge and skills, attitudes and values, and actions (Thelander, 2016). Different forms of CRE (Howe & Covell, 2010) have been developed to incorporate rights and civic matters in the curriculum. Tibitts (2002; 2017) identifies three core approaches to HRE: the Values and Awareness Model, the Accountability Model and the Transformational Model. The curricula discussed in this paper, in the form of CRE for early childhood education and care students, draw and refer to the latter approach, the transformational or transformative model (Tibitts, 2002).

Scholarship in the field of HRE and CRE has identified various areas for development. An area for urgent development is the lack of children's participation and engagement in the construction of the curriculum, and most frequently also in its delivery of activities (Alderson, 1999; Howe & Covell, 2010; Quennerstedt & Quennerstedt, 2014). A second pressing concern, which we examine in this paper, is the limited and unregulated rights-

based training of teachers and relevant professionals, combined within undemocratic and oppressive education systems (Jerome et al., 2015; Jerome, 2018; Reynaert et al., 2010).

Children's Rights Education in early childhood education and care

In the field of early childhood education and care, interdisciplinary children's rights scholarship has highlighted a lack of clear and strong theoretical underpinning, limited and unregulated rights-based training of professionals, and limited reflection and critique of existing undemocratic and oppressive education systems (Alderson, 1999; Jerome et al., 2015; Quennerstedt & Quennerstedt, 2014; Reynaert et al., 2010).

Children's Rights Education and early childhood share some foundational frames of reference, but also have many points of divergence in relation to matters of both practice and theory (Reynaert et al., 2010). In practice, effective engagement with CRE curricula is hindered by the lack of confidence of practitioners. On a more theoretical level, CRE might clash with the beliefs and values of pedagogical approaches. These very issues are highlighted by MacNoughton, Hughes and Smith (2007) in their reflective piece on the challenges that traditional early childhood pedagogies and philosophies might pose in the realisation of children's rights, as presented in General Comment (GC) 7. As a result, the authors encourage the field to not only 'reaffirm their status as experts, but (also) redefine their expertise' (MacNoughton et al., 2007, p.162). Similarly, Woodhead (2006) emphasises that a meaningful implementation of children's rights would require a shift in the way childhood(s) and children are conceptualised within the field.

In response to the challenges experienced in the implementation of rights within the field of early childhood, a growing number of scholars (Alderson, 2017; Quennerstedt, 2016; Smith, 2007; Theobald, 2011) has drawn attention to the role that the UNCRC (UN, 1989) could and should have, as a guiding principle for both research and practice.

The UNCRC as guiding principle for Children's Rights Education in early childhood education and care

Both the concept and the realisation of human rights are far from unproblematic (Brown, 2004; Moyn, 2018). Children's rights specifically are perhaps one of the most contentious and contested sub-categories of rights (Alderson, 2017), as frequently juxtaposed against a parental/adult rights' perspective (Guggenheim, 2005). Critiques stem also from within the children's rights field, where fruitful discussions explore issues such as cultural relativism (Montgomery, 2008; Moosa-Mitha, 2005), applicability, and the risks of top-down approaches (Liebel, 2012). In contrast to the external challenges, which have the tendency to stem from stale and unimaginative points of argument (Alderson, 2017), internal constructive criticisms of the rights framework have opened new opportunities

for development, research and exploration (Hart, 2008; Horgan et al., 2017; Liebel, 2014). In addition, these internal constructive criticisms have allowed for a new wave of engagement and consideration of the role of the convention as a legal and theoretical basis (Lundy & Martinez Sainz, 2018; Robson, 2016). It is on these grounds that we take the opportunity to re-engage in exploring the guidance provided in the UNCRC (UN, 1989) to promote children's knowledge and understanding of their rights, as key element for social justice.

The General Comment (GC) 5 (UN, 2003) offers a practical starting point for exploration of set requirements, as it specifically identifies 'education, awareness and training' as one of the five 'general measures of implementation'. In paragraph 53, the Committee specifies that the role of 'education, awareness and training' is to 'emphasize the status of the child as a holder of human rights, to increase knowledge and understanding of the Convention and to encourage active respect for all its provisions' (UN, 2003, p. 39). The document identifies in article 4, 42 and 44 of the UNCRC (UN, 1989) helpful references to consolidate understanding of governments' obligations in regard to education and training.

We argue that, on closer exploration, other articles in the UNCRC (UN, 1989) provide a meaningful contribution in clarifying the role of education, in the broad sense, as a pathway to realisation of rights. Specifically, an important clarification is made in article 28.2 (UN, 1989), in relation to educators and practitioners taking appropriate measures for discipline 'in a manner consistent with the child's human dignity and in conformity with the present Convention'. As also discussed in Alderson (2017), in reference to the research conducted by Pelicarno and colleagues (2015 cited in Alderson, 2017) on the experiences of children with additional needs and disabilities in schools, practitioners' awareness of and capacity to act within the Convention's guidance vary, depending on their knowledge of the Convention itself. In research with early childhood education and care practitioners', Robson (2016) observes that many practices are rights compliant, although often with no direct awareness of this. It could be argued that the importance of such awareness is highlighted in article 42 (UN, 1989), which specifically sets grounds for the right to knowledge of all rights, both in principles and provisions, for children and adults alike. It is however in Article 29 (UN, 1989) that one can perhaps find the strongest argument for the importance of CRE. The article emphasises the role of education in supporting children's knowledge and understanding of Human Rights and dignities, in preparing 'the child for responsible life in a free society' (UN, 1989). It is in this task that a rights-based education enabled and delivered by rights-aware and respecting practitioners could lead to a meaningful result (Jerome, 2018).

Most importantly for the purpose of our arguments, General Comment 7 (UN, 2005) provides further guidance on the specific obligations in relation to the early childhood sector with:

1. Paragraph 14, further clarification of Art. 12 and meaning of active participation as rights holders
2. Paragraph 17, Expansion of definition of evolving capacities (Lansdown, 2005) to include 'acquiring understanding about their rights and about how they can best be realized' (p. 8)
3. Paragraph 23, Clear indication of requirements for all practitioners involved in working with early childhood 'is essential that they have sound, up-to-date theoretical and practical understanding about children's rights and development' (UN, 2005, p. 11)

Close attention to government obligations under articles 28, 29 and 42 of the UNCRC, alongside the relevant sections of GC 7 (UN, 2005), reveals a number of gaps in the provision of CRE in the field of early childhood. In the next section, we explore arguments on the possible role of comprehensive and systematic CRE initiatives (Tibbitts, 2002) for early childhood education & care students, developed at Higher Education institutes in closing these gaps.

Children's Rights Education for the educators

Research indicates that Children's Rights are rarely explicitly articulated in early childhood practice (Jerome et al. 2015; Pardo & Jadue, 2018; Robson, 2016). Early childhood education and care degree students are primarily engaged in developing knowledge and understanding of the cognitive, metacognitive, affective and behavioural domains of children's experiences and everyday lives. In these contexts, students are frequently invited to engage and explore values and orientations that underpin elements of CRE. Robson (2016) raises questions in relation to the lack of established teaching of CRE in early childhood training, in which the knowledge of rights is diluted into the wider curriculum, rather than explicitly presented in its own right. Similarly, Curtis (1996) questions whether the unexplicit nature of teaching of rights might be 'cursory'. Curtis (1996) suggests that in this form, CRE fails to enable the possibility of nuanced discussions of complex concepts and principles and fails to provide students with relevant practice-based experience of advocacy and general application of children's rights. The lack of a clear curriculum, particularly in terms of content, is also identified as a limiting factor by Tibbittis (2002).

In discussing the need for CRE to be included in the training of health professionals, Lake (2014) suggests three core principles to form the minimum requirement of knowledge: participation, consent, and respect for evolving capacities. The author justifies this choice

on the grounds that these three principles form the knowledge base necessary to make a shift towards a rights and consent provision (Lake, 2014). In discussing HRE for professionals in public services, such as police and the military, Andreopoulos (2002) questions the efficacy of a knowledge driven curriculum, favouring the exploration of complex principles and notions through engagement with case studies and other creative techniques, which allow for a more direct form of participation of students.

The risk in rigid forms of CRE (or HRE), which focus on the acquisition of 'minimum required principles', is the reproduction of a top-down approach, in effect replicating the issues meant to be tackled through CRE itself (Tibbitts, 2002). The importance of the curriculum being aligned with and supported by the pedagogies and the practices of the educational setting is highlighted by Öztürk and colleagues (2019) and Inagaki (2002) in their exploration of CRE in countries exposed to high level of human rights violations. Elsewhere, discussions on pedagogical models lose significance in the face of the challenges experienced by professionals in the implementation of their learning.

Research in this area indicates the incongruency between the teachings of CRE and the established practices and beliefs in settings as a major challenge experienced by practitioners (Jerome, 2018; Tibbitts, 2002; Öztürk et al., 2019). In discussing CRE it is therefore impossible to ignore asymmetrical power differences and contrasting agendas reproduced in the specific context, through local and national policy and provision of early childhood education and care.

Context matters: Research, policy & practice

Rights under the UNCRC (UN, 1989) are universal, yet it is important for them to be contextualised and incorporated within relevant local realities, discourses and practices. Beyond the cultural norms and local dynamics, context also impacts children's rights on practical levels, such as in terms of research priorities, policy guidelines and practice applications. It is therefore of importance to briefly explore the status of children's rights in the two contexts of the two studies in discussion, England and Ireland.

The last two decades have witnessed significant developments in children's rights-framed and -informed research (Quennerstedt, 2013). On a broader childhood studies level research has focused primarily on three main aims: the recognition of children as active agents, the establishment of children's rights as a legal framework, and asserting that children's rights are not of detriment of parental rights (Reynaert et al., 2010). In the specificity of the early childhood field, research has however focused primarily on children as active agents. The element most explored in research in early childhood is in fact participation, whether in conducting research, exploring pedagogies, or delivering

practice (Quennerstedt, 2016). The seminal work of Lundy (2007) and Alderson (2008), among others, advanced the knowledge and understanding of children's participation beyond the practice of consultation, towards a meaningful recognition of agency and active citizenries in early childhood. The acknowledgment and appreciation of children's capabilities for active participation have facilitated the development of research with younger children (O' Sullivan & Ring, 2016) and of studies exploring more complex and nuanced theoretical conceptualisations of children's lived experiences (Kernan & Devine, 2010). The adoption of principles of the children's rights framework in research have therefore opened new opportunities for critical engagement with more traditional ontologies of childhood(s) rooted in principles of protection (Moore, 1997) and developmentally appropriate practices (Woodhead, 2006).

The translation of research into practice is however still complex and uneasy, and facilitation of encounters between the two worlds is a complex exercise (Zanatta et al., 2019). Whilst on one hand we are encouraged to push the critical engagement with ideas and principles of children's rights to expand and further our field of knowledge and possibilities (Alderson, 2017; Quennerstedt, 2013); on the other, we ought to nourish the development of stronger links between research and practice (MacNaughton et al., 2007). One of the arguments we will develop further in this paper is the role of the training and education of practitioners in promoting engagement and exploration of critical thinking in both research and practice, through children's rights informed praxis.

From a policy perspective, a comparative review of the two contexts indicates different patterns of priorities. In Ireland the principle of participation (Article 12) has featured prominently in childhood policy (Department of Children and Youth Affairs [DCYA], 2015). Constitutional changes have also seen the direct incorporation of two UNCRC (UN, 1989) articles, Article 3 (best interest of the child) and Article 12 (participation and views of the child) into the Irish Constitution (Bunreacht na h-Eireann). Another point in favour of children's rights in Ireland is the clear presence of a series of Ministerial figures dedicated to working on issues impacting children's rights directly. Whilst in Ireland the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs heads a dedicated Department of Children and Youth Affairs, in the English government the Minister for Children, Young People and Families sits within the lowest of the tiers of Parliament with the title of Secretary of State, within the Department of Education. The effective downgrade of the ministerial role in England has been described by the chief executive of a leading organisation working with children as both symptomatic of low commitment and an alarm bell for the weight given to children, their lives and experiences in Parliament (Feuchtwang, 2018). Unsurprisingly, in England the status of children's rights in policy making is low. Since 2008, the UN committee on the Rights of the Child has made numerous recommendations for the British government to enhance its realisation of and commitment to children's rights. The most recent Concluding Observation report (UN, 2016) contained over a

hundred and fifty recommendations for improving implementation of children's rights in England. In relation to the field of early childhood, the Committee made recommendations with regards to the need for expansion in services and increased attention in relation to vulnerable children (UN, 2016). With regards to participation the Committee identified limited opportunities for the meaningful participation of children in the decision and policy making processes (UN, 2016). The issue has consequently been highlighted in the annual report on the State of Children's Rights in England.

The introduction of a rights-based and unified curriculum in Ireland (Aistear) and of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in England (Department for Education [DfE], 2018) has opened wider opportunities for introduction of rights-based approaches in practice. Whilst the curriculum in Ireland includes a curricular entitlement to children's rights education for young children aged 0-6 (NCCA, 2009), the Early Years Foundation stage in England has refocused the delivery of services towards a child-centred approach (DfE, 2018). The possible efficacy of a child-rights based curriculum was observed in examples of practice based in Aotearoa/New Zealand by a study conducted by Hedges and colleagues (2010). Nevertheless, the opportunity to translate critical rights-informed research into everyday practices is impacted by a wider range of obstacles faced by practitioners and educators in the field of early childhood.

Whilst the challenges faced by practitioners in the two contexts vary, a common thread identified is the ongoing issue of a lack of appropriate funding and the de-professionalisation of the role of early childhood practitioners and educators (Lloyd & Hallett, 2010; Murphy, 2015; Osgood, 2012). The issues arising from the expansion of provision of early childhood education and care, with limited considerations for quality, both in training and professionalization of practitioners, have been discussed in detail in a 2012 OECD report and by Moloney and colleagues (2019) in a six-nations study conducted with the support of the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA).

The study

In light of the challenges and gaps in training and development of early childhood education and care practitioners discussed thus far, in this comparative study we aim to identify common threads in the pedagogies of the two different Children's Rights Education curricula in Higher Education.

In the analysis of the teaching and learning experiences, we were guided by two main research questions, detailed below. Two questions were identified in line with the overall objective of the study:

- What are the shared opportunities and challenges identified in the pedagogies of the two curricula?
- What recommendations to further the Teaching and Learning of CRE are identified in the pedagogies of the two curricula?

Through reflection on the themes emerging through this analysis, the study offers a set of recommended pedagogical features to further develop transformative teaching and learning of CRE in early childhood education and care degrees.

Context for the study: Two early childhood education and care degrees

In the following section we provide a brief overview of the two pedagogical approaches explored in our discussion of findings. Both curricula have been presented in more depth in other publications by the authors (Long, 2017; Long, 2019; Zanatta, 2020) focusing on the content, rather than on the pedagogies of teaching and learning. It is important to note that both curricula engage with CRE through a transformative approach (Tibitts, 2017). Whilst developing knowledge of the UNCRC (UN, 1989) and its articles, this approach also aims to support the exploration of and critical engagement with contextualised interpretation and application of the rights-based elements and principles (Bron & Thijs, 2011; Gill & Howard, 2009). This approach encourages the engagement of learners as agentic selves (Tibitts, 2017), both through and for personal and social transformation, the latter in the form of activism. Lastly, the model is grounded in the principle that knowledge of rights will ultimately lead to furthering their realisation (Reyneart et al., 2010).

For the purpose of this article, we will limit the overview to pedagogical elements of the curricula.

Transformative learning in Ireland

Drawing on findings from Long's doctoral study (2017), this is the first intentionally transformative children's rights education pedagogical model of its kind developed for early childhood students in the Republic of Ireland. One of the main purposes of children's rights education is to ensure early childhood education and care students understand their obligations in helping to realise the rights of all young children in their care. Consequently it is important that students receive a thorough and explicit grounding in the international children's rights framework as it applies to young children in order to appreciate how the UNCRC interacts with national law, policy and practice. This model has been embedded in a BA (Hons) Early Childhood Programme, while a more explicit and intentional module has been designed to be delivered as part of an MA in Leadership in early childhood entitled *Transformative Children's Rights Education.* Using participatory,

experiential, democratic and critically reflective pedagogies and practices founded on the theoretical traditions of Freire (1970) and Mezirow (1991), students are enabled to investigate and critique law, policy and practice through adopting a children's rights lens. By provoking critical thinking and nurturing practices and confidence to cope with dilemmas, complexity and ambiguity (Quennerstedt, 2013) students are facilitated to work through the various 'disorientating dilemmas' (Mezirow, 1991) they may encounter. The rights-based pedagogical principles of Osler and Starkey (2010) ensure the encounters are respectful and rights-based and can help to contain any cognitive dissonance. Comprehensive, systematic and interdisciplinary in nature, this model has the potential to enable students to become confident and knowledgeable about children's rights issues, while also experiencing a nurturing and empowering learning process themselves. In effect, transformative children's rights education builds students' skills and confidence to not only know about, but also to take action for children's rights.

Deconstructing knowledge in England

The second CRE pedagogical approach (Zanatta, 2020) was developed within a theoretical framework built upon the teachings of bell hooks (1994) and Burman (2008). Both authors provide a sound grounding for the learning ethos in the module, in the words of W. H. Auden 'growing chary/of emphatic dogmas'. Students are invited to explore the unfolding of their knowledge and experience through a series of theoretical questionings and critiques (bell hooks, 1994) of ontologies of childhood (Burman, 2008; Mayall, 2006) and of categories of childhood (Valentine, 2003). A core aim of this pedagogy is to support the development of a vocabulary and a set of theoretical and practical tools to deconstruct childism (Wall, 2012; Young-Bruehl, 2012). Students are invited to reflect critically on the figure of the adult as either friend, expert, or authority (supervisor, leader, observer) (Fine & Sandstrom, 1989), and to identify novel relational possibilities for liberatory practices (bell hooks, 1994). Questioning and reviewing is conducted through a series of specific issues impacting children's rights in the local and international communities. These are unpacked with students to both apply principles and to experience the act of 'staying with the trouble' (Haraway, 2016). In this process, the invitation is to be mindful of the dual nature of rights of education and in education (Lundy & Martinez Sainz, 2018). Students apply CRE to develop a piece of activism and advocacy on a specific current issue impacting children's rights. In this process, students are guided through a pathway of experiential learning, so that their work remains action-oriented (Burman, 2019). The re-acquired ownership of knowledge production and the engagement with activism are presented in this model as necessary elements supporting the uncovering and analysis of structural forms of oppression, experienced both by children and, intersectionally, by students. In this awareness, students are encouraged to always place rights and social justice before personal beliefs (Martinez Sainz, 2018; Moyn, 2018).

Data and methodology

The comparative analysis presented in this paper investigates the findings obtained from two separate sets of data collection, conducted independently.

The first study conducted by Long (2017; 2019), in the Irish context, was a mixed methods investigation on knowledge and understandings of CR of early childhood education and care students. Through five different research questions, the study focused primarily on students' existing knowledge of Children's Rights. An important element of this investigation was the discussion with students on their perspectives on the value that CRE would have in relation to their practice and role as early childhood education and care practitioners.

The second study conducted by Zanatta (2020), in the English context, was a piece of action research focusing on the specific delivery of the relevant Children's Rights Module. Both lecturer and students engaged in a series of reflections on the learning process, then analysed these through a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning model (Kreber, 2005), exploring experiences in relation to instruction, pedagogy and curriculum.

In this paper we use narrative as a method to uncover a way of knowing-being (Barrett & Stauffer, 2009), rather than a story. In this narrative method, the focus shifts from the general accounts to the specific experiential elements that have contributed to the process of meaning-making. Narrative forms become an opportunity for 're-presenting' (Barrett & Stauffer, 2009, p. 10) through a relational mode the constitution of knowledge, as informed by experience. Embedded within an educational context and informed by transformative models of CRE as theoretical paradigms, this methodological framework considers experiences through a Deweyan model. Experiences are therefore understood as relational and transactional, and informed by emotions, actions, cognition and communications (Dewey, 1938). The adoption of this definition promotes the inclusion of both internal and external factors, alongside past and future experiences. Students' learning experiences are considered to be shaped by the educational engagement with the module, by their future career plans, and also by their prior knowledge, their practice-experiences, and their everyday lives.

In the specifics of this study, the experiences of students and of the two authors, as educators, are incorporated as data providing insight on social practices and engagement in meaning making within the curricula studied (Clandinin, & Connelly, 1992). As per Dewey's model (1938), the relational dynamics in which the experiences take place are also considered as factors of influence and relevance.

The analysis presented in this article is not based on the raw data presented in the authors' other publications on the two curricula (Long, 2017, 2019; Zanatta, 2020). Rather, in this paper we engage in a thematic synthesis analysis composed of three steps (van Leeuwen et al., 2019): individual review of the sets and identification of core pedagogical features, shared discussion and review of these pedagogical features, identification of share themes.

The first step was a separate review of the results proposed in the studies adopted as data. Each author independently reviewed the results recorded in their study and identified the main pedagogical features that represented each curricula's opportunities and challenges, as emerging from the narratives of students and staffs' experience. The pedagogical features had to incorporate experiential narratives reflecting both on the students' data (presented in other publications) and our narrative experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Through this stage, across the two curricula, we identified fifteen points of potential opportunities and challenges emerging from the review of the narrative experiences with the curricula (seven from the study on curriculum 1 and eight for the study on curriculum 2, see table 1).

For the second and third steps, we held shared structured reflections, via online meetings. Firstly, the aim of these reflective moments was to discuss the fifteen pedagogical features to then identify and review similarities and convergences, in terms of opportunities and challenges, emerging from the two curricula. This first reflection functioned as opportunity to discuss and explore the fifteen pedagogical features identified across the two curricula. In the third and final step of the process, we proceeded to conduct a thematic analysis of these fifteen pedagogical features. The process of identification of the themes was led through an interpretative approach, through the abstraction of the experiences (presented as opportunities and challenges) into four key pedagogical dilemmas.

These four core pedagogical dilemmas are: agency, performativity, knowledge and time.

Having concluded the analysis, we then identified a series of pedagogical recommendations, or wish list, stemming from the pedagogical dilemmas, to inform and guide the development of transformative pedagogies of CRE.

Results

Four pedagogical dilemmas

In the following section, we present the four pedagogical dilemmas, as informed by the processed detailed above. Each area offers an insight into both opportunities and

challenges identified in the pedagogies of the two curricula. As discussed in the methodology section, these four dilemmas derive from the abstraction of experiences, both in terms of opportunity and challenges, associated with the fifteen core pedagogical features identified for each curricula, as presented below.

Table 1 Core pedagogical features in each curricula (result of step 1 of analysis)

CURRICULUM 1 *TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING IN IRELAND*	*CURRICULUM 2* *DECONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE IN ENGLAND*
Transformative	Mindful of democratic accountability and privilege
Working with and through disorienting dilemmas	Developing a vocabulary to deconstruct childism
Participatory and experiential,	Critical of figure of adult as either friend or authority
Dialogical, problem-posing, personal and interpersonal	Focus on rights OF education and rights IN education
Intentional focus on the UNCRC	Theory as liberatory practice
Tailor-made to the early childhood education and care professional context	Action oriented
Head, hands, heart and feet approach.	Rights before values
Rights-based principles	

Through the second step of the thematic synthesis analysis (van Leeuwen et al., 2019), we abstracted these pedagogical features into four emerging areas. These are areas of pedagogical dilemmas, incorporating both opportunities and challenges. These dilemmas are related to matters of: agency, performativity, knowledge and time.

Agency: Friend or foe?

The first pedagogical dilemma emerging from the two CRE curricula, in terms of underpinning pedagogy and mode of delivery, offers an opportunity to question the role of educators/students/pupils as promoted in the two models. In both models, a great deal of the learning process is aimed at creating an environment which promotes active agency. Students' prior knowledge is not only acknowledged, but also included as opportunity for circular and spiral reflection (Long, 2020), or for tracing developments in thinking (Zanatta, 2020). Informed by theoretical paradigms underpinning both models (bell hooks, 1994; Mezirow, 1991), this pedagogical strategy leads to an enhanced sense of challenge for students participating in the learning. A sense of uneasiness transpires

from students' narratives, particularly in relation to their role as active constructors of knowledge both in the classroom and in practice. The notion of agency itself constitutes a challenging variation to the field of education, where the banking model prevails as norm (Freire, 1970). In this sense, CRE curriculum in the formation of early childhood education and care practitioners might constitute a crucial opportunity to break the cycle of traditional processes of education. To promote a similar shift in favour of agency in the field of practice, a change in the role and status of practitioners would be required.

The perceived low status and lack of professional recognition feature as internalized narratives in students' experiences, both in discussing their current and prospective practice. As explored in prior sections, the ongoing devaluation of the figure of the early childhood education and care educator is dominant in the field of early childhood across both Ireland and England (Lloyd & Hallett, 2010; Murphy, 2015; Osgood, 2012). The issues of both low pay and low recognition of professional status places practitioners on the receiving end of a similar unfair treatment and unrecognition of socio-economic status to those of children. This quasi-shared status of injustice could be used as a catalyst for students' active engagement with their Transformational Potential (Jemal, 2017), an action-oriented extension of Freire's idea of Critical Consciousness. A point for further reflection emerges: could the, albeit tenuous, correlation of low status and low socio-economic recognition between children and practitioners have pedagogical importance? Could the wish for a reconceptualization of the practitioner as a professional role, support engagement in the reconceptualization of childhood as a category? Or would the status of professional/expert hinder the possibility for democratic engagements between staff and children?

The Issue of performativity

This second theme relates closely to the issue of authentic engagement and performativity, also explored by Jerome (2018). As already mentioned, critical scholarship has highlighted the challenges and the problematic aspects of rights-based approaches (Brown, 2004; Moyn, 2018).

A level of unease identified in students' narratives is often described in correlation with the clashing of children's rights with pre-existing beliefs, both of personal and professional nature. Specifically, some concepts are identified by students as particularly dissonant with their prior knowledge and views. For example, challenges to the notion of children's purity and innocence (Bernstein, 2011) are often contested by students as possible dangers to the children's welfare. In other instances, the Eurocentric nature of discourses (Montgomery, 2018; Moosa-Mitha, 2005) is identified as a limitation to the inclusiveness of children's rights. It is in the encounter with these 'disorientating dilemmas' (Mezirow, 1991) that the real potential of transformative, participatory and

critical pedagogies comes into view. Failing to apply these principles, poses the risk of CRE becoming yet another 'intervention' (MacNaughton, 2004), an educational hylomorphism (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004), the enforcement of yet another regime, masquerading under democratic pretences.

The issue of performativity emerges also through the contextualization of CRE as part of a mandatory education curriculum, which is not only assessed, but also at risk of being hijacked and conflated with performance management and other neoliberal agendas. Tibbitts (2002) also explored the problematic nature of accountability and standard-based recognitions. Tokenistic engagement with rights discourses is widely criticised and often called out. A tokenistic and superficial approach to the exploration and implementation of rights reinforces post-structuralist interpretations of these as mere form of control (Foucault, 1979).

Introducing an element of hope/possibility in relation to performativity, Lundy (2018) challenges educators to appreciate the possible positive outcomes that might inadvertently emerge from tokenistic practices, such as heightened awareness, unexpected interest, and curiosity. A false start is better than no start at all. Jerome (2018) concurs that even within the highly performative nature of HRE, one can find the space and the means for revolutionary models that subvert authoritarian practices and power. Alerting a person to of their rights, whether in a tokenistic/performative or authentic manner, leads to some extent of knowledge and awareness, and hence could be celebrated still.

Knowledge: Can you live without Piaget?

A preoccupation already raised by MacNaughton and colleagues (2007) in their reflections on the suggestions made in GC7, is the incongruency between traditional practices and theories of early childhood and children's rights.

Students' narratives reveal the discomfort and confusion emerging from having to navigate dissonant realities within the field. Whilst Jerome (2018) warns of the risks deriving from a dissonant setting, it is important to recognise that a classic education in early childhood education and care prepares students for a very specific way of approaching children and understanding childhood. In discussing matters of children's rights, students would regularly make reference to theorists and theories that have proclaimed the limitedness of childhood, as state of incompetency and need. For example, student's narratives highlight the existing imbalance in early childhood education and care curricula through questioning why traditional theories are still taught and celebrated, although no longer of relevance (Zanatta, 2020). In many cases, the initial encounters with early childhood traditional theories pose the risk of situating the

students within a deficit model of childhood, where what children cannot do has more bearing than what they can (Long, 2019). The popularity and establishment of rights and agency infringing theories, such as developmentally appropriate practices, performance driven learning, and exclusionary practices, actively impacts the range of action of CRE. It is in light of this imbalance that we argue that CRE in a vacuum will not suffice (nor be sustainable or meaningful). It is likely that many early childhood programmes have an implicit or embedded orientation towards children's rights, human rights or social justice, and it could be argued that such a value system does not necessarily have to be made explicit. However, if we take the UNCRC to be the legal articulation and guiding principle of children's human rights, it then becomes clear that vague awareness of children's rights is not enough (Lundy & Martinez Sainz, 2018), nor is an emphasis on values (Robson, 2018).

In depth knowledge is the required standard (art 42, UNCRC: UN, 1989). Scholars have called for radical revision/rejection of existing theories (Burman, 2007), pedagogies, and ideologies (Wood & Hedges, 2016). The question remains, 'can you live without Piaget?' (Penn, 2004).

Time (after time)

Transformative approaches in higher education contexts are difficult, time-consuming and emotionally draining. Students' narratives discussed thus far have unveiled the uneasiness, discomfort, mistrust and disorientation experienced in engaging with transformative learning strategies. What is yet to be discussed is the potential for achievement (not only in the academic or performative sense), empowerment, and liberation that CRE curricula hold.

In their narratives, students revealed they had uncovered and challenged injustices witnessed in their everyday experiences, because being both rights-informed and rights-respecting had empowered them to action (Zanatta, 2020). A student shared having gained further understanding of women's rights and gender inequality, through studying children's rights; whilst another reported being able to advocate for their child at school (Zanatta, 2020). Students protested the negative implications of paternalistic approaches (Long, 2020), and described the challenges faced in attempting to overthrow such practices as a clear obstacle to flourishing in their role. In comparing progress in students' knowledge, Long (2020) also identifies a significant shift towards a more children's rights informed conceptualization of childhood, with focus on capabilities and rights rather than on deficits. In a limited, yet important, number of narratives, students shared having also experienced a sense of liberation from their own ghosts of childhood through the possibility of naming the discrimination/injustice experienced as abuse (Lundy & Martinez Sainz, 2018; Zanatta, 2020).

A crucial recurrent feature in the collected narratives is the struggle, longing, and determination to find a way to develop what Taylor (2018) defines as a community of practice. Students shared what could perhaps be described as a sense of pride and aspiration in engaging with children through a children's rights perspective. Perhaps this is an indication of the potential enshrined in CRE for practitioners. Perhaps, CRE could be the opportunity for reconsidering not only the relational dynamics with children, but also the status of early childhood at large, a necessary requirement for a shift in quality and meaningfulness of the field widely (Zanatta et al., 2019).

Conclusions

Envisioning transformative CRE for early childhood education and care practitioners

Whilst we appreciate CRE is not the solution for all the challenges faced in the field of early childhood, we believe it represents a good starting point. After all, just as with children's participation, a tokenistic attempt is better than no attempt at all (Lundy, 2018).

We believe that the discussion of the four pedagogical dilemmas suggests that participatory and transformative rights-based pedagogies are filled with opportunities to open up new spaces for students, and practitioners. In these rights-based spaces, students and practitioners can seek out, contest and explore power and identify gaps, dilutions, barriers, resistances, and contradictions as they engage with policy, theory and practice contexts.

The four dilemmas offer also a clear indication of the many challenges faced by both educators and students in engaging with CRE and its processes. Therefore, rather than proposing a specific approach, a set of minimum threshold concepts (Taylor, 2018), or a quality-check process (Tibbitts, 2002), we wish to outline four aspirational pedagogical principles we believe to be fundamental for CRE programmes for practitioners to be meaningful and of impact.

Interdisciplinary and integrated

Childhood(s) are interdisciplinary and complex realities; as such, they require multifaceted and nuanced engagement and the taking into account of the numerous perspectives and experiences of children. CRE offers a further opportunity for early childhood education and care programmes to be interdisciplinary in their curricula. This would also promote the ongoing call for the development of novel intersectional approaches in CRE/HRE (Osler, 2016). An interdisciplinary curriculum would allow for

CRE to be integrated within the whole degree programme, whilst also remaining a clearly identified and integral element of early childhood formation.

Mandatory and contextualised

In light of paragraph 41 of GC7 (UN, 2005) CRE ought to be a mandatory requirement in all training of professionals who work with children. This mandatory nature would need to allow for contextualised forms of implementation and delivery. This relates to Jerome and colleagues' (2015) suggestion for a 'locally negotiated solution'. In this scenario, Higher Education institutes would assume the responsibility for building CRE support around the student using the existing legislative and policy framework and statutory guidance alongside early childhood knowledges, practices and values to the greatest extent possible.

The need for a balanced approach, which considers both the local and the universal, is highlighted also by Burman (1996) who warns against the creation of a new group of 'experts', commissioned to determine and regulate what constitutes normative and acceptable childhood. Similarly, as for the models of CRE designed to engage children, it could be argued that a transformational approach, aimed at questioning and shifting conceptualisations of childhood(s) (Covell et al., 2010; Özbek, 2017) would lead to a more dynamic and less tokenistic learning opportunity. Moving away from a knowledge-only based curriculum would also mean rejecting the calls for assessment of quality and effectiveness of CRE (Curtis, 1996), on the grounds that these would risk focusing on a series of superficial competences, rather than in-depth beliefs.

Theoretical in shaping praxis

Responding to the calls for Children's Rights scholarship to further its grounding in theory (Quennerstedt, 2016; Quennerstedt & Quennerstedt, 2014), CRE should support a thorough process of de-construction and re-engagement with all theories of childhood (Burman, 1996).

The integrated nature of the rights-based curriculum in early childhood education and care degrees would lead to critical questioning and unpacking of traditional theories of childhood, particularly of those that fail the 'rights-respecting' test of time. The movement to decolonise the curriculum (Nxumalo & Cedillo, 2017) offers here a great example for possible developments of practice in this direction. CRE represents an opportunity to overcome traditions and habits, to allow for interdisciplinary and intersectional childhood(s) (Louviot et al., 2019).

Political/daring

Crucially, as the rights-based agenda and discourses progress, expand and mutate, CRE ought to participate in the dynamic conversations beyond rights. Curricula should therefore not only promote the advancement of children's rights. CRE should primarily enable engagement in political and social discourses that challenge alienation, oppression and social injustices/inequalities. The shift needed is not solely from protection/needs to rights, but also from rights to democracy and fair and sustainable living.

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