Reflections from the higher education classroom: the role of playful pedagogy in the professional formation of early childhood students

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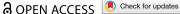Jenny Robson and Micky LeVoguer

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports a small-scale qualitative inquiry in the discipline of Early Childhood Studies in Higher Education that explores how playfulness in pedagogy might create an environment in which people within the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector (including students) engage in dialogue about structural injustice. Participants in this study are 14 people (students, lecturers and people working for professional associations, trade unions or grassroots organisations) who attended a networking event hosted in a university classroom in March 2023. Data was collected through lecturers' reflections on pedagogy and online semi-structured interviews that explored participants' experiences. We found that adopting a playful pedagogy both created opportunities for resistance to injustice and disrupted hierarchies in the ECEC sector. Playfulness in the HE classroom supported collective expressions of professionalism in the form of solidarity and voice.

Introduction

This paper reports a small-scale qualitative inquiry into pedagogy in a Higher Education (HE) classroom in the discipline of Early Childhood Studies (ECS) in an English university. The principal aim of the study is to explore how playfulness in HE pedagogy might create an environment in which people within the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector (including students) engage in dialogue about structural injustice. A secondary aim is to understand the potential of playfulness in HE pedagogy to disrupt the structures that shape knowledges of injustice; here playful pedagogy privileges democratic practices that have the potential to support the formation of individual and collective knowledge of professionalism for ECS students that responds to injustice (Holflod 2023).

Students on ECS undergraduate degrees are in a process of professional formation prior to entering the ECEC sector in England that is currently experiencing a crisis in sustainability (Lloyd 2021). Sustainability here refers to multiple challenges, including

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for example, the availability of ECEC provision to children and families in a marketised system, the recruitment and retention of ECEC practitioners, the fairness of the funding model, and the quality of the provision (Azad, De-Freitas, and Ville 2023). People in the ECEC system were mobilised into public protest by grassroots organisations including, for example, Pregnant then Screwed[1], Champagne Nurseries on Lemonade Funding[2] and Early Years Equality[3]. Injustices for ECEC practitioners, in this context, arise from the influence of neoliberal ideologies in the ECEC system. Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) argue that neoliberalism presents itself in complex ways, for example, women's labour is commodified, and governance structures are dominated by standards and measures of performance. In this neoliberal ECEC sector, profit making is privileged over democratic values and responsibilities to community (Mitchell, Vandenbroeck, and Lehere 2022). It is this complex landscape that forms the backdrop for this study.

Our initial reflection as lecturers in ECS revealed problematic dilemmas for our teaching in HE. We questioned how our teaching neutralised or silenced debates with our students on injustice experienced by ECEC practitioners (LeVoguer and Robson 2023). Our reflection also brought to the foreground the problematic implications arising from our positioning in the neoliberal university. Within the academy lecturers are subject to managerialist controls and this leads to an erosion of autonomy in teaching (Radice 2015). A hopeful positioning for us as lecturers arises from Albia and Cheng's (2023) conceptualisation of academic citizenship as a 'practice of enactment' (718) where academics both assert and enact their right to 'contest and challenge contextual structures' (718). This position offers freedoms for lecturers in ECS to collaborate with students and others in a critical examination of the ECEC system in England.

As lecturers in ECS, we convened a networking event in a university that brought together people including students, ECEC practitioners, civic society activists, campaigners, union representatives and lecturers to engage in dialogue about structural injustice in the ECEC sector in England. Networking, here, is understood as a social process that involves collaboration, communication, and the exchange of information (Bateman 2021). In the application of networking as a learning strategy, we are informed by Villar and Albertín's (2010) perspective that it risks instrumentalising and manipulating relationships for self-interest through the harvesting of knowledge and resources. Instead, we foregrounded reciprocity and connections between people. The daily pedagogy of the HE classroom was suspended in order to explore how playful approaches might support critical dialogue between people in the ECEC sector and open up possibilities for a collective response to injustice.

ECEC professionalism – a position of hope for collective action

Reflection on existing knowledge about professionalism led us to question how we prepared graduates of ECS degrees to navigate the structural injustices they will encounter in their future professional lives (LeVoguer and Robson 2023). A specific concern centred on the risk of foregrounding constructs of professionalism, in our teaching, that focus on the responsibilities of the individual practitioner. Taggart (2011) argues that individual expressions of professionalism may emphasise the caring role thus privileging a personal ethic of care 'evident in the moral burden which individual practitioners are expected to shoulder on behalf of society as a whole' (p.86). In this context women's emotional

labour 'is taken for granted and needs to be suppressed or harnessed as part of a caring role' (Fairchild and Mikuska 2021, 1177). However, recent research expands knowledge of ECEC professionalism to include micro expressions of activism, gestures or resistances in response to injustice (Archer 2022; Albin-Clark 2020; Mitchell, Vandenbroeck, and Lehere 2022). Such actions by practitioners are local, quiet and invisible (Archer 2022), however, Mitchell, Vandenbroeck, and Lehere (2022) found that the ECEC workforce also engaged in community and collective action. We were conscious that scholarship on professionalism had the potential to support ECEC practitioners in forming responses to injustices that they collectively experience. Professional identity and professionalism are not fixed; they are complex and constantly in construction (Fairchild 2017). ECEC practitioners' expressions of professionalism are 'entangled with their local societal and global context' (Arndt et al. 2018, 111) and need to be understood within contexts of injustice (Osgood 2021). In our teaching we began to understand the importance of building individual and collective professional identities that as Arndt et al. (2018) suggests may lead to a 'professional political consciousness and collective voice' (111). Mitchell, Vandenbroeck, and Lehere (2022), documented forms of collective action in ECEC, they found solidarity was a constant theme where practitioners come together with other people in the ECEC sector and the public to share experiences and create 'bonds' (204). We recognised that new forms of professionalism may arise where students have opportunities to join others and critique systems of structural injustice.

Learning from playful pedagogies in HE

In this section we consider the possibilities that playfulness in pedagogy might offer lecturers to collaborate with students and other people in the ECEC sector. Playful pedagogy in HE is a state of mind and an attitude that draws on play characteristics including democratic practices that nurture the creation of individual and collective knowledge (Holflod 2023). It offers a safe and low-stress environment for learning (Whitton and Langan 2019) where playfulness can reconcile tensions between both people and ideas by providing a space for simultaneous reviewing of familiar concepts whilst encountering new ones (Koeners and Francis 2020). The engaging and motivating nature of playful pedagogy fosters trust, fun, and joy (Holflod 2023). It has the potential to stimulate learning and promote cognitive flexibility and creativity (Koeners and Francis 2020). In this way we recognised that playful approaches in HE offers new opportunities for learning for both lecturers and students (Nørgård and Moseley 2021). When a safe enough space is created for play, players can cross boundaries imaginatively and create new meanings (Holflod 2023). This requires lecturers and students to adopt a lusory (playful) attitude where new ways of being and doing are accessible when there is the suspension of the familiar (Suits, 1978 in Nørgård, Toft-Nielsen, and Whitton 2017). Our understanding of pedagogy was expanded by a signature pedagogy of play for HE, as theorised by Nørgård, Toft-Nielsen, and Whitton (2017); it is characterised by surface level traits (materials, tools and actions visible in teaching and learning), deep structures (underlying assumptions for teaching and learning) and implicit structures (values, habits and ethics of teaching and learning). They observe that lusory attitudes and democratic values arise in the implicit structures; in this space people are intrinsically motivated and accepting of risk taking. However, playful pedagogy acknowledges that access to

play in the HE classroom is a privilege not available to everyone (Nørgård, Toft-Nielsen, and Whitton 2017, 2017). In the context of neoliberal university, a playful pedagogy can be risky due to the performance pressures to deliver prescribed outcomes (Whitton and Langan 2019). This resonated with our experience as lecturers; where the institutional pressure to deliver targets led to rigid guidelines on teaching, however, a position of hope emerges from our engagement with the literature on playfulness in pedagogy that creates new possibilities for critical dialogue and action.

Critical qualitative inquiry – a socially just mode of inquiry

Critical qualitative inquiry is understood as 'ethically responsible activist research' (Denzin 2017, 9) where researchers have responsibility to move beyond interpretation and initiate change in ways that resist injustice. This is aligned with our commitment to explore alternative pedagogies in HE that engage students in forming both knowledge of structural injustice in ECEC and professionalism that resists injustice. Inspired by Denzin (2017) our critical qualitative inquiry is characterised by the following goals: to foreground the voices of people (including our students) in the ECEC sector, to open possibilities for the HE classroom as a site for activism and finally, to affect changes in our pedagogy.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee; whilst ethical procedures prompt an ethical practice, they could not deal with all 'ethically important moments' (Guillemin and Gillam 2004, 262) during the fieldwork particularly when we as researchers (also lecturers) risked exercising power. We applied reflexivity as a tool, here understood as our ability as researchers to understanding what influences our actions and how we influence the research (Bassot 2020); for example, we recognised that people's experience of the event may be differ from our own and we chose not to share our perspectives with participants. We upheld an ethical practice by receiving written informed consent from participants. In the analysis and reporting of the findings we allocated pseudonyms to respect the privacy of participants.

Recruitment of participants commenced with an email invitation to the (n)55 people who attended the networking event in an HE classroom in March 2023 and from this group (n)14 people consented to be interviewed. Participants held diverse roles in the ECEC sector including students, practitioners, lecturers and civic society activists. The convenience approach to sampling relied on the interest of participants and their availability; however, we cannot assume that the sample is representative of the perspectives of all attendees (Robson 2024). Data was collected 6 months after the event; retrospective semi-structured interviews offer opportunities for participants to share their recollections that might be personally, socially or politically consequential (Knapik 2006). Semi-structured interviews are 'nuanced accounts of different aspects of the interviewee's life world' (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015, 33) here relating to participants' experiences in engaging with others on the topic of social justice.

As a theoretical framework for analysis of data we applied Brookfield's (2017) approach of critical reflection through multiple critical lens that both illuminate our pedagogy and disrupt our assumptions within it. In an earlier work Brookfield (2009) acknowledged that reflection risks focussing on teaching whilst not acknowledging 'power dynamics and wider structures that frame a field of practice' (p.293). We acknowledge that our assumptions as lecturers can be constraining factors in the classroom. Brookfield (2017)

Table 1. Critically reflective lens.

Critical lens	The perspectives of:
Personal experience as educators, co-researchers, and civic society activists	• *lecturers as influenced by the intersecting and parallel experiences as educators, co-researchers and civic society activists.*
Students as practitioners	• *students as informed by their current or previous experience as a practitioner in ECEC.*
Students as scholars	• *students as informed by their scholarship in the discipline of ECS.*
Colleagues as practitioners	• *colleagues who are or were practitioners or leaders of practice in ECEC.*
Colleagues as scholars	• *colleagues who are scholars in the discipline of ECS.*
Colleagues as civic society activists	• *colleagues who are civic society activists, here understood as action or advocacy for change in the sector.*
Colleagues as educators	• *colleagues who are educators in Higher Education.*
Theory – professionalism and playful pedagogy	*The perspectives informed by the conceptualisation of professionalism in ECEC and theorisation of playful pedagogy in HE.*

proposes four lenses for critical reflection on pedagogy; they are students' eyes, colleagues' perceptions, theory, and personal experience. Whilst the four lens are relevant to our study they obscure the potential involvement of civic society activists or practitioners in pedagogical relationships and assume that the identities of people are stable. We observed, at the March 2023 event, that identities were in a constant state of flux, for example, people simultaneously held or moved between the roles of scholar, educator, practitioner, and civic society activist. Accordingly, we expanded the critically reflective lens to include eight perspectives that align with the roles; they are included as Table 1.

Such a framework allowed for a nuanced analysis of the complexity of different groups of participants' experiences and perspectives. It was a tool within a strategy for thematic analysis and was informed by Braun and Clarke (2021). The strategy involved five cycles of reflection on the interview data and our experiences of the event, beginning the reading of data and simultaneously identifying emergent codes. The framework of eight critical lenses supported the process of coding the data as it gave visibility to the diversity of participants' experiences of the event, including pedagogy and expressions of professionalism. Subsequent cycles involved further coding of data, moving from codes to emergent themes, finalising the themes and ended with the construction of meaning within each theme. Within each reflective cycle we challenged our assumptions relating to pedagogy, participants' experiences and professionalism (Brookfield 2017).

Results

Three themes emerged from the analysis of data about the ways playfulness in HE pedagogy may create opportunities for critical engagement and new expressions of professionalism in ECEC. The themes engage with the synergies and diversity in the experiences of the participants at the event; this deep analysis was prompted by the researchers' disciplined use of the eight critically reflective lens.

Connecting knowledge of structural injustice in the sector – an act of playfulness

We assumed that in convening the networking event we gathered a group of people representative of the ECEC sector. Most participants commented on the richness of

knowledge arising from the diversity of sector roles present in the room; for example, Habiba (Scholar) said 'So it was a very beautiful combination of various representations, which, you know started the dialogue'. However, a surprising finding was the different perspectives about the role of universities in connecting knowledge across the ECEC sector. For example, Denise (Colleague as civic society activist and scholar) was surprised that a university would bring together diverse organisations rather than exercising power by focussing on the problematic issues of the status of ECS Degrees. In contrast Peter (Colleague as civic Society Activist) found it refreshing that a university would bring together practitioners 'to air their views and to give their opinions'. Most participants felt that HEIs had a significant role in connecting knowledge of injustice in ECEC. For example, Trisha (Colleague as Educator-Scholar) said:

> I just thought it was really brilliant to get people in … … .., so it was great to hear from them talking about their values and you know why they did the job and why it was important … . There were lots of students there who seemed to be really enthused … . it feels like that [this] what we should be doing as an organisation, [the] bringing together.

We knew that convening a networking event sat outside the formal structures of teaching and learning. Adopting playful strategies initiated democratic dialogue between people and shifted the boundaries as to what constituted a forum for learning. As convenors we consciously held power in constructing the invitation list but also in facilitating an event that emphasised the equal status of knowledge of structural injustice expressed by activists, students, practitioners and lecturers. A playful strategy was the invitation to people from campaigning organisations to pop-up during the programme in order to share experiences about their work. The element of surprise created a dynamic energy that prompted people to share perspectives by speaking out or writing campaign slogans for those in government. It provided opportunities for participation in dialogue.

We assumed that democratic relations were significant in generating dialogue. However, we were conscious that this only existed if all people agree to the conditions of democracy. Despite our efforts to decentre our authority participants in the study were aware of the power exercised by the academy over knowledge. For example, Evelyn (Colleague as Scholar-Educator) expressed concern saying; 'University knowledge is seen as really up there and therefore it gives the event a type of status'. However, some participants found the networking space empowering. For example, Leyla (Student as Scholar-Practitioner) valued the way she was positioned in the event:

> I love the way [the event] was organised and the way the roles were separated. The way each member got respected and got asked what they want to do … .., I think you want excellence as an ambassador.

Students were paid for their labour and consulted about their role. Our reflections found this strategy disrupted hierarchies in the classroom as students adopted new roles, for example, in facilitation of small group discussions.

Connecting stories of structural injustice

We assumed that engaging in dialogue would involve people in telling and hearing stories about the implications of structural injustice in the ECEC sector. It was risky inviting speakers to share their experiences as there was some unknown in both the content of

the story and attendees' responses. Each of the speakers chose to use personal stories of injustice in their professional lives as provocations for dialogue. Students revealed the different ways in which they connected with new and powerful narratives of injustice. For example, Sophia (Student as Scholar-Practitioner) said in response to Celony's account of her experience as a nursery manager:

> I remember being kind of shocked at how hard it is for smaller nurseries because obviously my experience is only from a social enterprise which is kind of a large-scale organization and their support [from] their central office. But I remember this woman owner of a small nursery talking, saying sometimes [she] doesn't even get paid to make sure that's just staff are getting paid. I remember getting angry [at] the situation.

Sophia made connections between her own and Celony's situation; but also gave an emotional response to the injustice. In this way, the data revealed how stories were powerful in connecting knowledge of injustice. Some participants connected with stories that emphasised the moral purpose and value of early childhood services. This is illustrated by Dionne's response to Peter's (Colleague as Civic Society Activist) provocation about his advocacy for the significant role of ECEC practitioners in children's lives, Dionne said:

> And I remember Peter was saying that he's even gone to Parliament and he's trying to get people on board to look into the injustice or the lack of resources. And I remember what Peter said [about early childhood practice] it[s] like the importance of having somebody constant in your life as a child. (Dionne Student as Scholar-Practitioner)

Here, as with many participants Dionne recognised the connection between recognising injustice and taking action. In our reflections we noted the often rapid physical movement around the room as people disconnected and reconnected in the process of exchanging stories or offering views on the stories of others.

Professionalism as action

We reflected on how particular constructs of professionalism in ECEC were present in the HE classroom in ways that positioned individuals in caring roles carrying the moral burden of injustice experienced by children and families. We assumed that such constructs constrained students' engagement with alternative expressions of professionalism, however, during the networking event participants reported a different experience. Most participants experienced solidarity in the room, for example:

> If there are more events like this … the sector is going to gain momentum, there is going to be kind of united cause it's hard … a bigger momentum would change and they're going to be more ideas. When you work in a nursery … in a setting, you feel like it just your bubble that struggles. (Sophia, Student as Scholar-Practitioner).

Sophia adopted a position of hope. She understood the potential to move forward; here connecting with people was a form of action. Action included the expression of practitioner voice that was not possible in the isolation of the individual nursery. Similarly, Evelyn (Colleague as Educator-Scholar) recognised the ways in which dialogue brought people together to identify ways forward; she said there was 'a real, I guess, sense of solidarity in that. Everyone in the room agreed there is a need for change.' We observed expressions of solidarity flowing through the emotional, physical and empathetic connections between people.

Most participants spoke of the significance of voice in reporting the ways in which they connected with the individual voices of speakers and contributed to the collective voice. The voicing of concerns became a form of action. A playful act on our part was to promote openness by not placing boundaries on the content of the provocations or the dialogue. Peter (Colleague as Civic Society Activist) shared that it was an 'incredibly open forum … … that people are starting to become more militant' and that this was in contrast to other events where he had to be careful about the 'narrative that one uses' in speaking about injustice. Peter recognised that open dialogue between people led to expressions of solidarity.

We recognised a continuum in the way people expressed their voice; beginning with individual and authentic voices of concern, followed by an emergent shared understanding and finally to a collective voice in the room calling for change. People moved along this continuum at different points during the event. We observed that the hierarchies and segmentation of people within the neoliberal ECEC sector were disrupted; conversations were initiated by everyone including scholars and practitioners who stepped into leadership roles. Similarly, attendees moved between the perspective of scholar and practitioner or educator and practitioner. Identities were not stable but dynamic and unpredictable and we interpreted these acts as playful engagement.

Discussion

Playfulness in pedagogy – a disruptive strategy

In this section we discuss our findings through the theoretical lens of playful pedagogy. Here our pedagogical assumptions about how to engage students and other people in dialogue are further disrupted. Nørgård, Toft-Nielsen, and Whitton's (2017) theory of a signature pedagogy for playful learning in HE provides a critical framework for lecturers to 'look beyond the surface structure of a lecture or class to focus on the deeper structures of teacher and student interaction and experience.'(p.276). Our participants account of their experiences concurred with our reflections that the structure of the networking event had promoted their collective critical engagement. We held a critical awareness that our attention was predominantly focussed on the surface traits of pedagogy which are the operational acts of teaching (Shulman 2005; cited by Nørgård, Toft-Nielsen, and Whitton 2017). However, a signature pedagogy requires us to move beyond the surface structures. Accordingly, we explored the deep structures which are the assumptions that underpin both teaching and learning as well as the implicit structures that support learning for example attitudes, dispositions, and values (Shulman, 2005 cited by Nørgård, Toft-Nielsen, and Whitton 2017). This provided fresh insights into the elements of pedagogy that prompted collective critical engagement and action.

At the surface level, we suspended the routine structures of the HE classroom (Holflod 2023). This was visible in our shift to networking from a lecture/seminar format, the arrangement of the room with equal size tables and the broad range of people from the ECEC in the space. Our findings illustrate how shifts in the operational arrangements of teaching disrupted the hierarchies that might operate in the ECEC sector and in HE classroom. For example, as lecturers we remained physically in the space with other attendees and the networking event's agenda gave equal status to contributions from students, practitioners, academics and civic society activists.

Reflection made visible the deep structures of our playful pedagogy. Our assumption was that playful collaboration might support connections between people. Nørgård, Toft-Nielsen, and Whitton (2017) characterise the deep structures of playfulness as including physical engagement, collaboration, and surprise. Our reflections revealed that playfulness in the HE classroom can take many forms; for example, the pop-up talks from civic society activists had an element of surprise as they were unannounced. Physical movement around the room was encouraged; this created a fluidity as attendees connected, disconnected and reconnected with each other. However, our reflection leads us to also consider that the shift in the arrangements for teaching and learning was a form of resistance in the neoliberal university but also potentially offered opportunities for resistance by attendees. For example, the convention in our university is that teaching is recorded; however, we made the decision not to record the session in order that responses to injustice could be expressed without fear of contributions forever being on the record. Similarly, the levelling of lecturers, civic society activists, students, and practitioners through the physical layout of the room was a playful act of resistance that disrupted the neoliberal managerialist controls that govern teaching and learning in the university (Radice 2015). In this way changes to the learning environment allowed for democratic conversations and for collaboration in constructing knowledge of injustice.

Reflection on pedagogy revealed implicit structures of playfulness in our teaching. Nørgård, Toft-Nielsen, and Whitton (2017) characterise the implicit structures as risk taking, democratic values, openness and a lusory attitude. One of the most significant shifts in our pedagogy was the level of risk taking in the learning environment. For example, we invited speakers to frame their contributions as provocations that included professional and personal stories of injustice in ECEC. This involved risk taking on multiple levels. As convenors of the network, we had to relinquish control of the knowledge that was being shared. However, speakers also took risks in revealing their vulnerability and activism in the face of injustice. We encouraged openness in dialogue and autonomy in the ways people expressed themselves; this was present in our findings where people expressed emotions of anger, empathy, hope and frustration. We assumed that the arrangements for the event would encourage democratic values; this was visible through the equal respect shown for different perspectives shared in the round table discussions. Playfulness was implicit in the way that attendees adopted a 'lusory attitude' (Nørgård, Toft-Nielsen, and Whitton 2017, 278), not only did they suspend their knowledge of the familiar university classroom and their roles in the ECEC sector, but they entered a networking space 'separate from the real world' (Nørgård, Toft-Nielsen, and Whitton 2017, 278) characterised by openness and democratic relations. The lusory attitude was present in the way participants revealed the complex layers of their experiences as people in the sector, for example, students moved between their perspectives as scholars and practitioners. Similarly, students as scholars moved to a new position embodying confidence, sharing emotions and asserting an authoritative political voice. This fluidity in the self-positioning of our students had not previously been visible to us educators.

Professionalism in ECEC – expressions of solidarity, resistance and action

Our understanding of professionalism in the ECEC sector aligns with Fairchild's (2017) finding that professionalism is constantly in construction. Students and other people

moved to a position of solidarity; here expressed as both an empathetic and emotional (angry) response to professional stories of injustice. This resonates with Mitchell, Vandenbroeck, and Lehere's (2022) finding that solidarity emerged where practitioners shared experiences and as a result they developed critical perspectives on the ECEC sector. Such expressions of professionalism are a resistance to structural injustice. Participants adopted a professional and political voice; they vocalised responses to stories of injustice and asked questions that disrupted the status quo that assumed injustices in the ECEC sector were to be tolerated. We observed that networking and making connections with others led to opportunities for collective voice (Arndt et al. 2018). It is from a position of solidarity that new forms of resistance in the ECEC sector may emerge including activism (Mitchell, Vandenbroeck, and Lehere 2022). Participants' accounts did evidence emerging forms of action; vocalising authentic perspectives and collective knowledge on injustice was an action, as was expressing empathy at the experience of other people.

Implications for our pedagogy and future research

Our study raises possibilities for lecturers' pedagogy in the discipline of ECS. Playful pedagogy can extend conditions for learning; applying Nørgård, Toft-Nielsen, and Whitton's (2017) signature pedagogy for playful learning may prompt insights into previously invisible learning experiences of students. It may also prompt risk taking by lecturers to open the HE classroom for dialogue with the ECEC sector. Playfulness in pedagogy can be a tool for lecturers to enact academic citizenship (Albia and Cheng 2023), it gives freedom to disrupt the contextual structures in the ECEC sector that govern students and practitioners' professional lives. In this way playfulness can be subversive through 'tiny revolts' in the classroom (Nørgård and Moseley 2021, 2). In implementing a critical qualitative inquiry, we committed to both research HE pedagogies that have the potential to respond to unjust conditions in the ECEC sector but also to connect students to diverse and critical knowledge beyond the physical or virtual boundary of the HE classroom. Further empirical research into playfulness in pedagogy in the discipline of ECS may reveal possibilities for new pedagogical practices that have the potential to develop students' critical voice.

Notes

1. Pregnant then Screwed is a campaigning charity in England that offers advice, mentoring and support to pregnant women and mothers to make informed choices regarding employment, careers and childcare. Further information the charity can be found at https://pregnantthenscrewed.com/your-rights/
2. Champagne Nurseries on Lemonade Funding is a support group for all people working in the early childhood education and care sector. It was initiated by practitioners to highlight the problems faced by the sector. Further information on their work and the issues they campaign on can be found at 'It feels like a sinking ship': inside Britain's struggling nurseries | Childcare | The Guardian.
3. Early Years Equality is a grassroots campaigning organisation led by practitioners who work in the ECEC sector in England. As an organisation, they campaign for a just funding system and an ECEC system that delivers for children. Further information on their work can be found at http://earlyyearsequality.com.

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Disclosure statement

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