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Researching young people's sexuality and learning about sex: experience, need, and sex and relationship education

Julia Hirst

This paper describes findings from an in-depth case study of young people's sexuality and learning about sex. Focus groups and unstructured interviews were conducted with young women and young men aged 15–16 years in a school in the north of England. Analysis focused on disjunctions between reported sexual behaviour in a park and in a bedsitting room, and the content of school sex and relationship education. Tensions between the accounts are considered for their impact on learning about sex, sexual negotiation, subjectivity and inter-generational understanding. Despite some negative experiences in sex education, the young people interviewed desired the affirmation and support of adults, and recommend sex and relationship education as the most appropriate vehicle for providing this. The value added outcomes of participation in the study, including consciousness and awareness raising, and the opportunity for reflection and debate and selves as 'experts', enhanced young people's view that non-judgemental and meaningful advice and guidance are possible in formal learning contexts. Implications for future forms of sex and relationship education are discussed.

Introduction

In the international literature on health education and sexual/reproductive health, young people's behaviours are frequently presented as relatively homogenous and risk-laden, devoid of agency and of passion. Such a view is paralleled by the contents of much school-based sex and relationship education—in the UK at least. Here, adults largely frame both content and process, believing that their understanding of young people's needs is sufficient to offer an appropriate menu of options.

But is this true and is there so clear a match between what young people experience and need, and what is made available? This paper explores such issues within the context of a small-scale investigation conducted in England (Hirst 2001). The study sought to enhance understanding of the contextuality and diversity of young people's sexual practices. It also aimed to problematize some of the representations of teen(age) sexuality in more traditional/mainstream, political and academic debate. Context, faith, cultural beliefs and social processes are salient to the ways in which sexuality and sexual practices shape identity, agency and subjectivity.

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Method and study participants

Data were collected from a group of 15, 15–16-years-old secondary school students from working class backgrounds. All attended the same school, which was located in the suburbs of a city in the north of England and had a history of multi-ethnic catchment. Access to participants was negotiated via the headteacher, the co-ordinator for sex and relationship education, and the form teacher.

The sample was purposive insofar as it specified a particular age range (14–16 years), and sought to include young women and men of different ethnic backgrounds, and with a range of sexual attitudes and experiences. The school staff selected a year form group that was felt to best satisfy these criteria. The resultant sample represents those who volunteered following an initial invitation to the whole form group. The group comprised 11 young women (one Pakistani, four Somali, two African-Caribbean, and four White) and four young men (two Pakistani and two White).¹

Four focus groups and 15 subsequent un-structured, small group and individual interviews were conducted ‘as conversations’ (Kvale 1996). Each lasted approximately 60 minutes. Data elicited were corroborated by observations conducted in sex and relationship education lessons, policy document review and interviews with key teaching staff. The research strategy aimed to foster trusting relationships with participants so as to facilitate understanding of everyday worlds from their standpoint (Smith 1988).

Findings

Setting sex in its social context

Although participants were informed that sexuality and sexual behaviour were to be the foci of the research, it was decided to make socializing the first issue for discussion to ensure that disclosures on sexuality were contextualized in the broader landscape of young people’s lives. Such a strategy allowed relationship building; conversations were animated and the group seemed to relish telling stories of social lives, particularly with an adult present. As a pre-cursor to more intimate disclosures, a focus on socializing provided time for familiarization with languages, dialects and slang. This meant that when sexual behaviours were introduced, both respondents and researcher had ‘tested the water’, and were more confident to check out meanings and inferences, without risking premature termination of the discussion or undue embarrassment. Within a relatively short period of time, discussions became fluent and relaxed. In fact, it was participants who instigated moving discussion on from general socializing to sexual behaviour:

Maisie: Shall we talk about sex now?

Sean: You talk about it if you want to

Maisie: Don’t you want to then?

Sean: Yeah as long as it’s not a boring talk.

Maisie: Well she said [reference to JH] it was up to us, we can decide what’s important.

Without prompting, more vocal members began relating stories of sexual activity. African-Caribbean and White females dominated the discussion in large group

settings, but in small group and individual interviews, others disclosed sexual experiences and substantiated, elaborated or disputed the disclosures arising in group discussions. Pakistani and Somali participants did not disclose much about their experiences until they had been separated from White peers.

Impact of context on sexual negotiations and subjectivity

As Aggleton (1998) has argued, sexual negotiations are best understood in relation to the micro-context in which they occur. Young people's experiences and learning relates to the embeddedness of identity, discourse and practice in social relations and specific temporal and spatial locales (Giddens 1991, Dowsett 1999). For the young people in this study, there was a striking difference between actual sexual experience and that constructed in sex and relationship education.

Contrary to the impression created by much of the content of sex and relationship education, sex was not a private act, nor was it a practice restricted to indoor locations (e.g., bedrooms). Rather, it was intrinsic to the collective (and public) socializing event. Furthermore, venues for sex rarely facilitated negotiation over its nature. Encounters were furtive, often rushed and in the vicinity of others. For White and African-Caribbean males and females, all the sexual activity disclosed had occurred outdoors, with friends nearby:

Well it [sex] only happens on a Friday night at the park, when t'others [friends] are there ... say any time between eight and ten o'clock. Most of us have to be in by half past ten at latest, ... so it can be a bit rushed. (Maisie)

Indeed only Hanif and Javed (Pakistani males) had had sex indoors. This had taken place in a one-roomed bedsit above a 'take away' restaurant (where Hanif worked) after late night shifts. The experiences were not afforded privacy and were again restricted to specific times:

Anytime between 2.15 and about 4am. (Javed)

Well we have to share the room, there's only one ... so it's never ... like ... private ... Ya just don't have big lights on ... Me and Javed have to share the room and the lasses know that. (Hanif)

Lack of acknowledgement of the constraints of time and place in sex and relationship education was highlighted by many of the young people interviewed:

I've always had my clothes on or most of 'em. I've never done it inside in a comfy warm bedroom or bed even and I've been wet and freezing loads of times. (Julie)

Yeah, they [teachers] don't mention how cold it is when they're on about contraception ... or, that you have to be quick 'cos you ant [haven't] got all the time in the world. It's not nice and relaxed like they [teachers] make out [suggest]. (Maisie)

While the effects of lack of privacy, time and weather conditions on the ability to negotiate sexual preferences and/or safer sex with a potential partner are obvious, other concerns make conspicuous the meanings mediated by, and the impact on subjectivity of, the contrast between expectation and reality. Interviewees felt that sexual activity in public places (i.e., the park or bedsit) would be viewed by adults as even less permissible than sex in private and therefore likely to enhance any condemnation should it be talked about or exposed. More important for young

women in particular, was the significance of sexual behaviour in settings that were inconsistent with the romantic and idealized imagery they had been led to believe in:

It's not just that we are doing it [having sex], it's that folk would go mad if they knew we did it in the park, and it's not exactly how you'd like it to be either or how you thought it would be. (Maisie)

Yeah it's horrible really to think you have to get all mucky and get leaves on your bum [sex in the park]. It's nowt like you thought it were gonna be, like in films and sex education lessons. (Josie)

Don't exactly make you feel good about yourself. (Jo)

Sexual negotiation is facilitated by confidence and a positive sense of self (Fine 1988). But involvement in 'public' sex diminished the potential to achieve this. In particular, young womens' aspirations of sexual identity were not easily reconciled with contexts for sexual practice.

Reductive and normative sex and relationship education

Much of sex and relationship education seeks to delay and/or promote safer sexual behaviour (DfEE 2000). For those already sexually active, useful education would include guidance on a range of safer sexual activities. But the young people in this study experienced sex and relationship education that limited sexual behaviour to vaginal penetration and, not insignificantly because of the meaning it conveys, for the purpose of conception. This contrasts with the more extensive sexual repertoires disclosed by young people themselves:

Kissing and snogging is kissing on the face or on here [points to her breasts] or here [groin]. (Maisie)

Fondling means feeling, like stroking, here [points to breasts] or here [groin] through or underneath your clothes. (Angela)

Rubbing off means playing with a peni (sic), sometimes till he comes [ejaculates]. (Jo)

Fingering is fingering inside her or just on outside. (Josie)

Gobbing off or gobbled off means your mouth on the peni (sic). (Maisie)

Licked out or licking off is same as gobbing off, but a boy doing it to a girl's bits. (Josie)

Significantly, safer sex including 'heavy petting' or foreplay (kissing, stroking, mutual masturbation and oral sex) occupied a far more significant position than is acknowledged in the content of most sex and relationship education curricula.

Beyond this, the mutuality of foreplay, which includes young women as well as young men in the active role runs counter to normative constructs of female behaviour (Jackson 1998), and the contents of much education in school. These behaviours could be more adequately acknowledged in sex and relationship education in order to promote more egalitarian and non-sexist sexual relations.

Education's failure to enhance awareness of sexual anatomy and facilitate communication between partners was evidenced in participants' limited or inaccurate vocabulary. Sexual repertoires were described through words and gestures that largely excluded anatomical terms or accurate descriptions thereof. For instance, the penis was referred to as the 'peni' by young women throughout the research, and in describing oral sex with the female as the recipient, or masturbation, young women either pointed to their genitals or used all-encompassing phrases like, 'on the girl's bits', 'you know, under your pants'.

This is not to suggest that communication cannot occur in the absence of clearer knowledge of sexual anatomy and vocabulary (as some young women's reports on sexual negotiations evidenced) but is to emphasize that sexual negotiation should not be hindered by either lack of familiarity with, or confidence to use, a mutually acceptable language. For the young people interviewed, sex and relationship education had provided no platform to share or rehearse the various languages and repertoires for sex, nor to extend awareness of strategies for choate communication. As Greer (1999) and Monk (2001) have argued, paternalistic ideology ostensibly concerned to protect young people's innocence should not result in a silencing that denies their right to enhanced knowledge.

Heteronormic forces (Atkinson 2002: 120) in sex and relationship education were conspicuous in young people's disclosures. The terms 'real sex', 'going all the way', 'doing it properly' and 'getting down to the basic thing' were used throughout, and defined by interviewees as descriptions of vaginal penetration that could include ejaculation. These construct vaginal penetration as the assumed outcome of 'proper' or 'real' sexual activity. Respondents surmised that these norms for 'doing it properly' came from sex and relationship education lessons:

Never thought about it before, but suppose it's what you get given in sex education.
(Jo)

In discussion, the researcher asked about the impact of media such as television and magazines on perceptions and beliefs but all said these sources were not as significant as the views of teachers:

Suppose they do influence you but when it comes from teachers it sort of has more ... I dunno, ... importance. (Josie)

Neither did sex and relationship education acknowledge the degrees of sexual experience between the two poles of substantial and no experience:

It's like in sex education, you either have sex, as in, with a willy inside ya, or you don't. Well it's not true, there's all sorts goes on between that. (Angela)

Failure to recognize this continuum both sabotages the opportunity for input to promote safer non-penetrative sexual practice (which some young women were striving for), and reinforces the legitimacy of vaginal penetration over other forms of sexual expression:

There's nothing for me in sex education ... I know all the stuff about how to have a baby but they don't tell us owt about other types of sex. It's stupid 'cos it makes you think you're maybe a bit weird 'cos you're not having proper sex. (Julie, *her emphasis*)

Young people's sense of a lack of support to maintain current safer practices in the absence of validation by reputable confidantes, was notable:

I just think, if I could talk to someone, like honestly, and I could trust 'em and they didn't tell on you, well you might think again about going all the way or just get that reminder in your head that you're worth more. (Josie)

It's like I'll remember these talks with you (reference to JH) and I hope it'll make me think before I do summat I might regret. (Millie)

Such disclosures flag the potential for sex and relationship education to influence the decision-making processes of those on the precipice between some (e.g., mutual masturbation) and significant sexual practice (e.g., penetrative acts). Timing is crucial here. Young people in this study bewailed the fact that sex and relationship education took place too late (Hirst and Selmes 1997, Measor et al. 2000). For optimum impact, guidance best occurs before teenagers enter into sexual liaisons and is then followed up so as to reinforce the endorsement of abstinence or safer behaviours.

The heteronormative agenda also excludes discussion of anal sex. Anal sex had not been raised in their sex and relationship education but participants disclosed knowledge of its practice among friends. Two reasons were offered:

She had it [anal penetration] by accident, she said it just slipped in. (Maisie)

Alternatively, anal sex represented more safety from pregnancy than vaginal penetration:

It's safer, can't get pregnant. (Josie)
If ya haven't got any jonnies [condoms]. (Jo)

When asked, no individuals had considered the potential for transmission of infection through unprotected anal sex.²

While teenagers from minority ethnic backgrounds were sexually active, only White identities were represented in their school sex and relationship education. Likewise, in policy documents there was scant recognition of the diversity of ethnicities and cultural practices (see also Hirst and Selmes 1997, Bannerji 1999). African Caribbean, Pakistani and Somali students were aware of these excluding representations, which concealed their identity and experiences:

There's nowt about me in sex education. It's all White. (Jo)

It's [sex education] not really aimed at us ... Pakistanis. It's like more for White kids. (Ruby)

Muslim students suggested an explanation for this:

Everyone who isn't a Muslim thinks that we don't do it 'cos of our beliefs and 'cos we don't allow being in sex education lessons. But you're wrong there, very wrong. (Javed)

Ruby alluded to the impact of institutionalized racism:

Ruby: ...they [teachers] think we aren't gonna be in sex education anyway so I suppose it's not worth bothering to put Black people in your videos or your books.
JH: Have you ever seen any Black people featured in sex education?
Ruby: Never ever. Not in a video, never on worksheets, never on a leaflet. They're always White.

Teachers corroborated students' observations in admitting that the needs and experiences of ethnic minority students had 'not been prioritized in planning sex education', despite this being a school with a long history of multi-ethnic catchment. The school's co-ordinator for sex and relationship education attempted to justify this position on the grounds that most Muslim students did not participate in sex and relationship education through consensual self exclusion.

This perception of consensual exclusion was misinformed and highlighted ignorance. While Muslim students did indeed excuse themselves from some aspects of sex and relationship education, this was not decreed by their faith. Hanif and Javed said their faith permitted participation but admitted taking advantage of teachers' ignorance in excusing themselves from 'doing worksheets and that. We stay in for videos'. Muslim females could participate in sex and relationship education but not in the presence of males, hence had to exclude themselves from lessons because the teacher was male, and male peers were present.³ From the perspectives of the young people interviewed, sex and relationship education practice privileged majority ethnic identities and provided little by way of equality of educational opportunity through the failure to provide in ways compatible with the needs of all students, irrespective of race.

Significance of pleasure

Findings from this study contrast with past research (see, for example, Measor et al. 2000) which suggest that young women are unlikely to speak of sexual pleasure.

JH: Do you enjoy sex?
Jo: It's gotta be about enjoying yourself.
Maisie: I've always done it 'cos I wanted to ... not 'cos me hormones made me. My brain and my feelings made me.
Josie: Yeah nobody makes me do it, you do it 'cos you want to enjoy yourself.

Young men also problematized essentializing notions of teenage sex as symptomatic of adolescent urges, curiosity or rebellion:

You don't just do it 'cos you're a teenager, or your mates tell you to, you do it cos you want to. And they can't say it's teenage curiosity. Everyone, Mums, Dads, teachers, everyone's curious about what it would be like with so-and-so. If you aren't curious, there's summat up with you, you must be dead boring. (Dale, his emphasis)

Everyone does it sometime, it's not 'cos you're a teenager and you want to be bad, it's 'cos you can do it now and you want to do it now [raised voice]. If you could only do it after say when you're 20-years-old, they [adults] wouldn't go on about how bad it is. If teenagers do something, it's bad, if adults do the same thing, it's not bad. (Sean)

It is significant that a discourse of pleasure relating to sex was largely absent from discussion until participants were specifically questioned on the issue. Normative

discourses and expectations of teacher's judgements militated against the articulation of the emotional aspects of sex:

JH: Why has pleasure not been mentioned before?

Jo: Well, you're just not used to talking about it.

Maisie: How are you meant to admit ya like it? Teachers would think you're a slag.

Given the content of sex and relationship education described by young people in this study, wherein sexual pleasure and sexual entitlement were missing, the omission of any discourse of pleasure is reinforced. Not only do curricula fail to provide a usable vocabulary for articulating desire, they also appear to endorse ideologies of women as passive with little or no agency in their own right. Indeed, for young women to include pleasure in reflections on sexual biography entails a major risk to reputation (Lees 1993, Harding 1998). Hence, irrespective of the place of pleasure in lived experience, such was not disclosed proactively in larger group settings but instead was only discussed within the security of small group or single sex interviews.

Overall, formal contexts for learning about sex and relationships provided few opportunities to articulate 'discourses of desire' (Fine 1988: 35). While the pedagogical difficulties of eliciting narratives of desire in the classroom should not be underestimated, these and other data (see, for example, Todd 1997) argue for a greater focus on desire and identity within sex and relationships education curricula. To do otherwise, ignores the realities of young people's experience and the opportunity to promote safer sex. For instance, once encouraged by dialogue and affirmation of their entitlement to pleasure, participants began to request guidance on ways to enhance levels of enjoyment:

Can you tell us anything about how to get it going again when it's finished ... 'cos like ... you don't always feel you've had enough. (Maisie)

Yeah, like more on spicing it [sex] up. (Jo)

While Maisie's and Jo's requests offer optimism for female agency, they also provided an opportunity for the encouragement of safer practices such as mutual masturbation.

It is important to acknowledge the influence of peer norms, alcohol, coercion and unequal gender relations on claims to pleasure, choice and agency. Young women's responses pointed to a need to reject any linear relationship between practice and context, and instead appreciate its complexity and the place of individual agency:

JH: Have you ever felt forced into sex?

Josie: By who?

JH: Well, 'cos your mates are doing it or by lads?

Josie: No lad will make me but you might feel a bit odd if you've not done it and everyone else has. It affects how you feel about yourself and you have to be right determined to stick to your guns.

JH: What about alcohol, you've said before that being drunk might influence whether you have sex, or stick to your guns?

Maisie: It does if you're pissed. But I still make my own mind up how far I go.

Josie: You make different decisions at different times, it depends how you're feeling really. It's dead complicated.

Significantly, and probably as a product of earlier discussions, pleasure was then talked about without prompting:

Jo: And you have to balance what you're gonna do with whether you are gonna enjoy it or not.

Maisie: Yeah, you'll sort of remember that now, like whether you're gonna get owt out of it.

JH: Why will you remember it?

Maisie: Well, 'cos we've been talking about it and it's not shameful to want to enjoy it.

If choice, pleasure and situational contingencies such as alcohol and lack of time are acknowledged as operating in sexual decision making, then sexuality as a phenomenon resistant to the impact of the social and cultural world remains problematic. While the influence of peer norms, social deprivation and family biography on pregnancy rates has been highlighted (albeit in a somewhat simplistic manner) in recent UK Government reports (see, for example, SEU 1999), a somewhat traditional view is offered in these accounts that separates sex from pleasure, and promotes myths of ignorance, innocence or coercion as primary factors in unsafe sexual practices (see Bullen and Kenway 2000, for fuller critique). Such discourses fail to acknowledge embodied female sexual desire and agency, which is essential to improving the effectiveness of sex and relationship education for preventing negative sexual outcomes and promoting positive sexuality.

Need for diversity of approaches

Participants in the study did not disclose their sexual experiences en masse or contribute equally to discussion irrespective of who was present. They needed time and the opportunity for conversation in single sex groups and single ethnicity groups, (with their choices deciding the make-up of groups) before disclosing the particularities, complexities and nuances of their experience, beliefs and aspirations. By allowing for this, it was possible to learn more about the importance of specific local contexts and the range of sexual cultures that existed, even among such a small sample.

If provision is to match need, diverse and flexible approaches need to be engendered in the planning and implementation of sex and relationship education strategies and a 'one-size fits all' approach is unlikely to prove effective (cf. Thomson and Blake 2002).

As well as providing a variety of forums for disclosure, the success of the research owed much to my explicitly articulated commitment to prioritizing participants' agendas (i.e., 'you decide what's important'). For young people, this was a novel experience and clearly appreciated for its contrast with top-down, less-negotiable forms of learning and teaching.

It is paradoxical that while sex and relationship education is accused of not reflecting young people's realities (see also Buston and Wight 2002), teenagers perceive adults as either possessing or giving the impression of superior knowledge that is difficult to contest and/or leaves little space for admissions of experience or counter opinions. Young people in this study had rarely experienced the opportunity to offer their expertise and experience, especially in matters sexual. Adults' silence or an unwillingness to elicit young people's insights and opinions was the dominant

experience. This situation is not difficult to undo so long as educators admit naivete' and do not set themselves up as experts with immutable and prescriptive beliefs and agendas. Instead, they should emphasize their commitment to seeing the young people as experts on their own experience. Explicit statements to this effect are not sufficient but should be re-emphasized in subsequent actions, as illustrated in the following extract where my request for explanation of participants' sexual practices met with incredulity:

JH: [Can you explain what you mean by] 'getting off with', 'had him', 'down to basics', 'and the rest'?

Maisie: Course you know [what we mean], do you want us to give you a lesson?

Sean: You're kidding aren't you?

JH: No, I just want to get it right.

When asked why they thought their meanings would be understood, they responded with:

Sean: You're an adult, you've been young once.

Julie: You aren't daft, Miss.

JH: Yeah but there's lots I don't know.

The discussion that followed was animated and good humoured, and participants clearly derived a sense of empowerment from having the rare opportunity to 'teach teachers' and have their status as knowledgeable recognized:

Never though about myself as an expert on anything. (Jo)

I know, it feels weird us telling you something you didn't know. (Julie)

Demonstrating a genuine commitment to privileging young people's perspectives appears to lead to greater trust. This encourages young people to speak more frankly and henceforth opens up the language for sex. The latter facilitates an unthreatening interrogation of young people's phrases and their meanings and exposes ambiguities in sexual discourse, the complexities of sexual interactions and their negotiation. It is also vital that young people witness a challenge to their assumption that adults hold stringent views and that, moreover, these views are always oppositional to their own. Being seen as open to different opinions, asking young people to persuade you as to their perspective, disclosing aspects of one's own biography (with necessary caution) and observing compromise or the welcoming of alternative insights, can reinforce a sense of the educator's authenticity. These strategies bring us a step closer to meaningful understanding of young people's authentic experience. In turn, this permits a closer matching of provision with need and more routinized and effective communication between adults and young people.

Context, diversity and the impact of normative constructions of identity and practice

Data discussed above highlight the impact of situational factors on teenagers' sexual experiences and agency. These include micro-level (e.g., personal and private) factors as well as those pertaining to learning about sex in the public sphere of school sex and relationship education. Sex and relationship education will be more effective if a broad framework for teaching and learning is emphasized from the outset. For many young people, sex and relationship education will not be

meaningful if it is decontextualized and reduced to the mechanics of sexual behaviour. Variation in contexts for sex and the potential impact of these on outcomes, must be acknowledged and not judged if young people are to view instruction as useful rather than punitive or unrealistic.

Educators should be mindful of the potential implications for young people's subjectivities—and their willingness (or not) to enter into dialogue with adults—when imagery and discourse is used that prescribes contexts and practices for sexual behaviours that do not match personal experience. Sex educators can do little to influence the contexts for sex but can usefully acknowledge it is often furtive, clandestine and rushed. This can create tensions for sexual negotiation and influences young people's sense of self. The place of, and desire for enjoyment, also requires endorsement and its relationship to negotiating sexual fulfilment emphasized. It remains to be seen whether recent guidance on sex and relationship education (e.g., DfEE 2000) will facilitate a more pragmatic acknowledgement of the realities of young people's lives.

Throughout the study, young people's reflexivity was increasingly evident. In particular, interviewees demonstrated their knowledge that sexuality is a highly contested concept (Harding 1998) exerting normative and powerful influence on young people's involvement in sexual acts. Documentary evidence and interviews with teachers suggested that young people's reflexivity was not matched by reflexivity on the part of teachers, or the goals and processes of sexual and relationship education. As Delamont (2000) has argued in a different context, the failure to embody reflexive modernity in educational policy and practice can jeopardize young people's potential with consequences for the ways in which society reproduces subjectivities. At best, teacher training and continuing professional development should include guidance on reflexive practice that fosters the ability to see the world from each others' standpoint, both between educator and student and between peers. In its absence, sufficient time for debate and the sharing of perspectives could remedy some of the failings.

Political and contemporary education

Finally, there is a need to dispense with strategies which deny young people's sexuality out of concern to protect the 'innocence' of childhood (Jackson 1982). Related to this is the need for teachers to be more skilled and have more time for connecting sexuality to the politics of the body and the variety of ways in which individuals of different genders, sexual orientations, ethnicities and abilities experience identity and practice, and the mechanisms by which they are regulated.

Without this, there remains too much potential for young people to leave school poorly resourced to negotiate their journey through to sexual adulthood and with a propensity to take individual (rather than collective and societal) responsibility for any perceived failings. Sex and relationship education has to equip young people for the now and for the future. Mediators of identity and practice and learning about sexuality have to be recognized as bounded by power, social class, ability, gender, ethnicity and politics. As such, teachers and students alike could benefit from 'political' education on the issues that structure experience and facilitate inequality. As well as consciousness-raising, this might facilitate reflexivity and assist in

diminishing the tendency to internalizing negative constructs of teenage sexuality and instead embracing more positive ascriptions of identity.

Conclusions

Without diverse and innovative approaches, sufficient time and a commitment to hearing and acting on young people's voices, sex and relationship education is unlikely to uncover less frequently heard insights, the perspectives of more reticent students, or those of minority ethnic students. It will hence fail in its commitment to ensuring a mainstream entitlement to sex education for young people of all cultures, faiths, ethnicities, sexualities, genders, experiences and abilities. Future forms of sex and relationship education have to engender greater reciprocity between instructor and student as opportunities for fun, consciousness raising and learning about strategies to bolster self-esteem and achieve aspirations. This will give sex and relationship education a uniqueness that makes it memorable and hence more likely to impact on subsequent decision making and behaviours.

The saliency of 'trusted' adults and reminders of selves as 'once young', in influencing young people's perspectives, actions and sense of agency should not be underestimated. In parallel, young people have much to teach adults, and this gift should not be overlooked for its potential contribution to the planning of policy and delivery of sex and relationship education.

Newer sex and relationship education initiatives, such as those currently under trial in the UK (e.g., Wight and Abraham 2000) offer some grounds for optimism since the need for theoretically and empirically informed input and methods is acknowledged. However, Wight and Abraham stress that theory must be embedded in a realistic awareness of classroom culture and teachers' skills. An essential key here, it would seem, is to equip teachers with the necessary confidence, skills and political education to deal with the challenges presented by acknowledging young people's sexuality and the right to sexual autonomy. As Bay-Cheng (2003) argues, this would mean discontinuing the emphasis on the threat of negative outcomes (pregnancy, STIs and assault) and instead presenting sexuality as positive and healthy aspect of life. Significantly, in citing various bodies of evidence, she asserts that this approach is more able to enhance our understanding of young people's sexuality and help young people's self-efficacy in saying 'no' to unwanted sexual encounters, but also 'yes' to those that are consistent with achieving desires and safer sexual outcomes. The promotion of positive sexual health must of course be underpinned by clear policy on sex and relationship education and personal, social and health education. Concern for young people's narratives, and their systematic and non-tokenistic participation in policy planning, delivery and evaluation of sex and relationship education, has to be prioritized if such policy and resultant curricula are to have any chance of success. As Slim and Thompson (1993: 73) have put it,

More than most groups, children have been 'spoken for', and often misunderstood or misrepresented ... [young people] need to voice their own views of the way they live and relate their personal histories, if [we] are to understand their situation and provide appropriate support.

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¹ Descriptions of ethnic identity are those chosen by participants. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

² Sex and relationship education that excludes anal sex is probably symptomatic of a denial that heterosexuals might include this practice in their repertoires and a generalised resistance to discussing lesbian and gay issues. While teachers might elect to ignore the importance of the latter (see Robinson and Ferfolja 2001), failure to include anal sex in safer sex guidance is similarly unjustified.

³ Such policy and practices merit inspection and revision if they are to comply with the requirements of the UK Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. Section 71 of the Act imposes the

duty on schools (and others/bodies specified under schedule 1A) to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful racial discrimination and promote equality of opportunity and good relations between persons of different racial groups.