

**It's got to be about enjoying yourself: young people,  
sexual pleasure, and sex and relationships education**

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## **‘It’s got to be about enjoying yourself’: Young people, sexual pleasure and SRE**

Pleasure as a component of sexualities and relationships education has been much rehearsed recently. Arguably, theoretical debate and critique been more prominent than practitioner perspectives on how to persuade stakeholders of the value of implementing pleasure into learning about sexualities and relationships. This paper offers a rationale for positive SRE that includes pleasure. A series of theoretically and empirically supported suggestions are offered to encourage curriculum gatekeepers that SRE premised on a right to pleasure is warranted because of its potential to achieve safer sexual health outcomes and contribute to gender equality. Challenges faced by some sex educators are acknowledged by historicising the often uneasy associations between sexuality, education and youth in relation to some political and academic dimensions of debate, before offering a rationale on ways forward. Analysis focuses on young women. Policy developments relate to the UK but issues raised have relevance for SRE in other contexts.

Key words: pleasure, sexualities and relationships education, youth

### **Introduction**

Education on sexualities and relationships aims to support young people’s social, sexual and emotional wellbeing. This paper argues that to be useful in this respect, positive notions of SRE should be central to the programme. Though there are numerous reasons for involvement in sexual practices, pleasure is undeniably significant. In recognition of this, a national conference (hosted by the Centre for HIV and Sexual Health 2007) addressed why and how to raise issues of pleasure in sexual health promotion with recognition of policy contexts, safeguarding, gender, religions and sexual dysfunction. My presentation focused on young people, sexual pleasure and SRE in school settings. Though convinced by the arguments, numerous sex educators reported that personal conviction would be insufficient to persuade senior management/governors and/or parents of the value of addressing pleasure in SRE. This paper is a product of subsequent requests from these sex educators to write up my presentation and ‘give status’ to its content via publication in a journal.

Hence, this paper develops ideas about why pleasure and positive notions of sexual practice and outcomes are worthy inclusions in SRE. It does not deny the important contributions by Allen and Carmody (2012), Maxwell and Aggleton (2012) and others but is explicitly written to support practitioners in arguing the merits of this approach through recourse to empirical evidence and theoretical ideas, and as a means of broadening more traditional models of SRE. Discussion draws on debates that problematise traditional forms of sex education that focus on disease and pregnancy prevention (for example, Alldred and David 2007) together with ideas about young people and sexual competence (Ingham 1998, Wellings et al. 2001, Hirst 2008).

Among factors significant to sexual competence and what is termed variously as ‘comprehensive’ or ‘positive’ SRE, pleasure has been highlighted by affiliates in various contexts of place and discipline, for example, Vance (1984), Fine (1988), Tolman (1994), Irvine (2002), Ingham (2005), Allen (2007), Beasley (2008), Schalet (2011) and others. Given that pleasure was highlighted as an omission in discourses of female sexuality more than twenty years ago (Fine 1988) its ongoing exclusion from much sexuality and relationships education in schools is difficult to justify (Fine and McClelland 2006) for numerous reasons (which this paper will outline) but most importantly for reasons of gender equality and potential to achieve safer outcomes. Though recent reports in the UK note pockets of excellent practice (e.g. MacDonald 2009) there is little evidence that recommendations on the importance of pleasure have been implemented in more than a minority of schools. This lack of progress towards meeting young people’s continuing calls for positive and empowering forms of SRE prompts this paper.

Since it frames much of what follows, it is useful to clarify definitions of SRE and sexual health. For SRE, the Sex Education Forum's (SEF) definition is functional: 'Sex and relationships education is lifelong learning about sex, sexuality, emotions, relationships, sexual health and ourselves' (SEF 2005, 1). In practice, this involves acquiring information, developing skills and forming positive beliefs, values and attitudes (op. cit.). The emphasis on relationships, feelings and skills distinguishes this type of sex education, as reflected in the change of name from Sex Education to SRE which was driven by young people (SEF 2000).

Regarding sexual health, the World Health Organisation's unofficial definition is apposite because it informs numerous international, national and regional sexual health documents and offers an agenda for thinking about sexual health in broad terms which are comprehensive and holistic:

Sexual health is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled (WHO 2006).

These broad and comprehensive notions of SRE and sexual health are integral to this paper in that sexual health is construed in positive terms within a broader context of sexualities, relationships, wellbeing and the potential for pleasure, safety and respect for rights. Negative or preventative aspects such as sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unplanned pregnancy are not ignored; rather, emphasis is placed less on adverse outcomes than skills and processes that can support and equip young people to negotiate their futures and protect their sexual health. In the Netherlands and Scandinavia, this approach is largely uncontested in school curricula. But in parts of the UK and US this can be less than straightforward because of disputes and debates that have endured the last half century (Irvine 2002). This article summarises some features of the historic political and academic dimensions of these debates, then offers a rationale to support SRE based on a positive model that includes pleasure.

## **Methods**

The paper draws on evidence and theoretical ideas from a range of disciplines, especially social sciences, education and health. Arguments relate to UK policy contexts but have relevance for numerous other countries where sex education is similarly contentious. Empirical studies directly relevant to the focus of the paper are not extensive but pertinent data have emerged from broader studies wherein the issue of sexual subjectivity and/or pleasure has resonance but was not the ostensible or primary focus. At points throughout this paper, verbatim quotes are referenced to illustrate arguments. These are taken from a qualitative research study (Hirst 2004) on socialising, sexual practices and the implications for sexualities and relationships education. The precise data used came from one branch of the study that involved a series of qualitative research interactions with 15-16 year old students from a state secondary school in the suburbs of a city in the north of England. Participants comprised 11 females and 4 males from one form group selected by their Year Tutor as representative of the school cohort in relation to a mix of gender, ethnicity and academic ability. Participants consented to involvement following an introductory talk on the research project.

Four focus groups involved all 15 participants, with attention to group dynamics (Morgan 2007) and familiarisation with the languages and colloquialisms for sexuality. Three semi-structured interviews followed with friendship groups (one with 6 girls and 2 boys; one with 5 females, one with 2 males), then five individual semi-structured interviews involving only females. Focus groups lasted 45 minutes, group interviews 45-60 minutes, and individual

interviews 60-90 minutes, and took place during lunchtime and after school, on school premises. Interviews were conducted as informally as appropriate and were more akin to conversations (Kvale 1996). An aide memoire with cues derived from previous sessions was used but allowed ample space for interviewees to steer the direction of discussion.

Participants disclosed only heterosexual experiences and confirmed themselves as straight. Ethnicities (as described by participants) included African-Caribbean, Irish, Pakistani, Somali and white. This variable is not discussed in this paper. The verbatim extracts used in the ensuing rationale have been anonymised and attributed via pseudonyms and represent female participants only. This is largely because females volunteered for more interview sessions than males and single sex female sessions yielded more data significant to pleasure and SRE.

### **Historicising SRE**

Sex education in the UK has rarely been uncontested but school-based sex education did not become a politically divisive issue until the late 1960s. Hampshire and Lewis (2004) point out that post Second World War policy makers broadly agreed that sex education was warranted as a solution to public health problems, particularly the increasing incidence of STIs. Following an HMI (His Majesty's Inspectorate) report that sex education in British schools was inadequate, in 1943 The Ministry of Education published the first guidance on sex education in the form of a pamphlet, *Sex Education in Schools and Youth Organisations*. Hampshire and Lewis (2004) stress that though this, and subsequent guidance, was tentative and not without controversy, objections were relatively latent for the next two decades. But the 'permissiveness' of the 1960s stirred hostilities reminiscent of the present day with traditionalists and pro-family groups seeking to prevent the teaching of sex education because of its alleged potential to corrupt young minds and encourage sexual behaviour (e.g. see Bailey 2011). Thus was born the furore that conflates sex education with opposition to reform from those keen to maintain traditional 'family' values. Hampshire and Lewis cite the concerns (in the 1967 Report) of the Royal Commission on Medical Education that such moral controversies and disagreements 'could undermine the fundamental aims of sex education, which "must never be allowed to become an outlet for reactionary opinion" ' (p.298). This statement encapsulates debates that have endured the ensuing half century with opponents still seeing sex education as a problem and proponents seeing it as a solution to public health problems (op cit. 290). Concomitant permutations of government policy and practice recommendations in the UK have followed this pattern of dispute (see detail in Martinez 2009) with a resultant lack of demonstrable progress in meeting young people's needs and improving outcomes for sexual health.

The turn of the twenty first century marked a renewed drive for progress with calls from some quarters for universal SRE that engenders a shift from a negative to a positive model of SRE and notions of sexual health underpinned by pleasure from those concerned with gender equality and safer sexual outcomes. Within politics, the British House of Commons Health Select Committee in 2003 called for change in its report on the failure of government sexual health policies to interrupt the rise in teenage pregnancies and STIs (Evans 2006). The default to omitting pleasure (and bearing no relation to the WHO definition of sexual health) was also recognised in the government's admission of a 'crisis' in sexual health: '...the word "pleasure", and the concept of pleasurable sex, are almost wholly absent from the UK sexual health policy discourse. Official documents may promote "safe" sex, and sometimes "abstinence" from sex, but never "pleasurable" sex.' (Evans 2006, 237). He concludes that the critical absence of pleasure and the associated medicalisation of sex in sexual health policy in the UK reflect an ongoing pattern of neglect interspersed by 'narrowly disease focused incremental changes' with little evidence that this pattern is likely to change (p.249).

The continuing adversarial status of sex education was highlighted in the withdrawal of a proposed change in law to make SRE compulsory for all up to the age of sixteen as a component of PSHEE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education) in all schools in England in 2011 (Margolis 2010). Despite supportive evidence from independent reviews (Rose 2008, Macdonald 2009) and various other bodies (see Martinez 2009) the entire section on PSHEE and compulsory SRE was removed from the Children, Schools and Families Bill amid fears that it would impede its passage through the House of Lords and prevent other aspects of the Bill becoming law before forthcoming parliamentary elections and possible change of government. It is unclear what the change of UK government from New Labour to a Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition will mean for SRE, but with compulsory entitlement on hold, content and approaches are likely to remain ad hoc. and divide opinion for the foreseeable future. Arguments move now to some academic aspects germane to these divisions in opinion.

Traditional programmes of sex education restrict content to the biology of puberty and reproduction. A summary critique of this approach is detailed in Ingham and Hirst (2010) and points to some common issues. They include emphasis on risks and dangers of sex and outcomes of STIs and pregnancy; lack of attention to relationships and social circumstances in which sex might take place; if sex is indeed discussed, vaginal penetration is often the only option, and heterosexuality tends to be assumed with lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and questioning (LGBTQ) young people being minimally or completely unacknowledged. Advocates of this approach resist attention to more positive aspects, such as how to get the best out of intimate relationships in order to be safe and achieve healthy sexual development. In extreme cases, including the 'abstinence' approaches, there is silence around pleasure and desire, or they are highlighted as paths to catastrophe. Though robust evaluations are in short supply, these conventional and 'abstinence only' models of sex education have not proved effective in bringing about risk reduction or protecting health in the longer term (Santelli et al. 2006, Jeffries et al. 2010). Moreover, credibility is lacking because abstinence models do not match what young people say they need (Forrest et al. 2004, UK Youth Parliament 2007) or have said since the 1960s (see Schofield 1965).

Young people are clear on this issue. They want sexualities and relationships education (as distinct from sex education) that is realistic and acknowledges the place of pleasure in sexual activity. This does not dispute that people are involved in sex for numerous reasons with many sex acts forced or non-consensual (Boris et al. 2010) but young people are voicing that they want to know how to get the most from an intimate relationship (FPA 2010), make 'sex more interesting' (Coleman and Testa 2007, 299) and SRE that engages with sexual pleasure (Allen 2005a). Reports on educational standards and SRE and PSHE in England and Wales replicate these messages in relaying students' calls for more open dialogue on the positive and emotional implications of sexual relations (Ofsted 2002) and the need for this input before 'feeling sexual desire' (Ofsted 2007, 11).

At the time of writing, the position remains nonetheless that in schools in England and Wales the personal and/or religious views (of parents, headteachers, MPs etc.) can supersede guidance on best practice for comprehensive and balanced SRE. Objectors hamper progress through many of the same arguments as the anti-permissive lobbyists of the 1960s mentioned above. Goldman (2008) addresses a selection of these arguments, and chief among them is the aforesaid desire to 'protect' young people from comprehensive forms of SRE because of the belief that sexual knowledge is dangerous and might encourage sexual experimentation. This can manifest in silence on sex and sexual identity or input that is too late and restricted to biological and heteronormative content. It certainly deters any mention of pleasure. The belief that information might corrupt and, conversely, that ignorance is essential to maintain innocence constructs young people as passive and dependent on adults (Jackson 1996). An

alternative view acknowledges young people as sexual and gendered subjects, with rights to information and support that can empower them to protect their current and future sexual selves. Such an approach necessitates SRE centred on young people's needs rather than the personal views of the sex educator. But, as the most recent government inspections concluded, a majority of schools do not base their 'curriculum sufficiently on pupils' assessed needs' (Ofsted 2007, 7). Such lack of acknowledgement highlights the routinised failure to honour young people's rights as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989). Ensuring SRE is student-centred meets this commitment and is a sure way to signal to young people that SRE is striving to be real (by responding to expressed needs), to be of use, and committed to attending to gaps and/or misinformation in learning about sex and relationships. The ensuing rationale enshrines this commitment with methods that support young people's sexual subjectivity, agency and sexual rights (Corrêa et al. 2008) and skills to negotiate egalitarian relationships and participation (or not) in consensual sex, both now and in the future.

### **Rationale for a positive model of SRE: why pleasure is an important aspect of SRE**

This rationale focuses on SRE in schools but has relevance for formal and informal interactions with young people in other settings.

The numerous grounds for this rationale are introduced in turn, below. However, the first overarches the rest, and is the goal of this model of SRE - to support the development of young people's skills and competencies for having and maintaining positive sexual health and equality within relationships.

#### Skills and competencies for sexual health

Notions of competency (Wellings et al. 2001; Hirst 2008) are not simple and there is no gold standard, but it is sufficient to summarise it as the ability to be involved in relationships and/or sexual practices which are chosen, satisfying and involve reciprocity with negotiations over options of no sex, safer sex, contraception and condom use etc. It follows that a successful and positive sexual experience is one that involves feeling in control and without subsequent regret, regarding the sex act, person or circumstances in which sex took place, or post-sex worries over contracting STIs and/or conception. The issue for SRE is how to support young people in achieving this. Each of the following points is relevant to this objective.

#### Pleasure, safer sex and the prevention of HIV/STIs

Conventional sex education, as described above, is underpinned by an assumption that emphasis on the negative consequences of sex for health will be enough to deter sex or promote safer sex. This is problematic because the protection of health is not proven to either motivate safer sex or lead to the avoidance of sex altogether. Alongside guilt, religiosity, parental views and saving oneself for marriage, abstinent youth cite health as a motivator (Abbott and Dalla 2008) but a plethora of other factors comes into play for already sexually active youth which relegate health to less significance than pleasure and lust. Anecdotally, this is borne out in the 'just got carried away' (in the heat of the moment) explanation for not using condoms. SRE is inadequate if it does not acknowledge this.

Sex positive SRE that recognises pleasure also has critical importance for HIV/STI prevention initiatives. This is evidenced in the Global Programme on AIDS across 14 countries (Boyce et al. 2007) that concluded successful programmes are those that stress the creative and pleasurable aspects of sex with open and honest discussion about sex and sexuality being vital. Philpott et al. (2006) reported similarly that barriers to pleasure are cited as the main factor in the non-use of condoms and hence stressed that successful condom strategies should no longer focus on the risks to health of sex without condoms and instead stress that condoms can bring

pleasure as well as protection. SRE has a vital role in reinforcing narratives that equate condom use with pleasure with some useful resources beginning to emerge<sup>1</sup>.

Using condoms in sexier ways to increase sensation and sustain use is not necessarily straightforward, as is negotiating any form of safer sex, be it non-penetrative or penetrative with a condom, but is most effective when it involves communication which is clear and uninhibited. This is difficult enough for sex per se - asking for pleasure can make it harder still. This brings us to the issues of gendered silences and constructions of sexual identity and practice.

#### Challenging constructs of sexual identity, practice and silence on female pleasure

In the matrix of heterosexual relations, sex and pleasure, gender is hugely significant. Through endorsing pleasure as important to sexual health, there is the opportunity for SRE to challenge socio-cultural expectations of femininity and masculinity and the heteronormativity that is common to many traditional sex education programmes. A key aspect is the problematisation of silence around female pleasure.

An enduring norm within (hetero)sex is men constructed as seeking physical pleasure (i.e. need to satisfy and be satisfied) and women as chastely non-desiring, or desiring sex but seen as loose and sullied (Hird and Jackson 2001). Data catalogues young people's pleasure in their solo or partnered sexual experiences (e.g. Hirst 2004, Allen 2005b, Hogarth and Ingham 2009) but Farquhar's (1999) point that 'decades of resistance to acknowledging - never mind promoting - the right to, and pursuit of, sexual pleasure for women and young people and more or less defining such motivation as deviant or shameful' (p.51) is still relevant. Gendered constructs position females with less rights to pleasure than men in many contexts, including the classroom, and this ensures that Fine's (1988) concept of the 'missing discourse of desire' is as relevant today as it was more than twenty years ago. The following comments from two female students, aged 15 and 16 years (Hirst 2004) offer illustration. The wider context for the extract is a discussion on their experience of school sex education:

Do you enjoy sex? (Interviewer)

It's gotta be about enjoying yourself (Jo)

Yeah [...] you do it cos you want to enjoy yourself (Josie)

Why has pleasure not been mentioned before? (Interviewer)

Well, you're just not used to talking about it (Jo)

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

This quote illustrates different reflections of the same problem implicit to traditional approaches. First, no space is usually afforded - figuratively or literally - to legitimise females' right to pleasure. Second, this lack of acknowledgement reinforces normative perceptions on the impermissibility of female pleasure and expectations of judgement and insult to reputations. These and other young women's expectations of judgement, should they talk about sex or disclose enjoyment, are a product of numerous historic and institutional forces (Foucault 1979), hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995) and 'heteropatriarchal' (Kitzinger 1993, 231) sexual scripts. Traditional sex education provides a perfect vehicle for transmission of these values, with content and discourses that privilege active notions of male sexual subjectivity from the early stages of schooling. The silence around pleasure and omission of any recognition of females' potential for sexual agency is one such mechanism of regulation. Other mechanisms are more explicit. For instance, in primary education in England and Wales, a precedent is set in the infamous 'wet dream' lesson that grown men can recall years after the event - perhaps because it signifies one of the earliest markers in the critical rite of passage to sexual manhood. That some sex educators still mark it in such an explicit way with a dedicated all male session, and females receive no equivalent on sexual feelings during puberty, can symbolically mark a normative trend for the future.

Later on in school life, ideologies of women as passive with little or no agency or entitlement to pleasure are promoted, perhaps inadvertently, in the emphasis on vaginal intercourse – quite often the only sexual act depicted in traditional forms of sex education – and illustrated pictorially with images of a woman positioned submissively under a man. The heteronormativity embodied in the latter is picked up below. Cumulatively, the effect of silences and lack of active female sexual scripts can be to deter young females from acknowledging sexual desire because it feels safer to adopt a passive demeanour and avoid speaking openly about desires and sexual satisfaction. This can manifest in mutual miscommunication and ambiguity, and at the same time, maintains the status quo that privileges male but not female pleasure. Numerous studies have evidenced this phenomenon (Holland et al. 1998). Young women will continue to conceal their sexual experiences and not ask for support unless this impasse of silence and symbolic inferiority is problematised. SRE which is underpinned by recognition of the importance of pleasure can prevent or interrupt this cycle since the starting point endorses female pleasure as a right – a right which is equal to male assumptions of pleasure.

Such a stance has implications for developing sexual competence, not only in the right to pleasurable experiences, but the related ability to exercise choices regarding involvement in relationships and/or sexual practices dependent on whether they entail enjoyment without shame, as this subsequent disclosure illustrates:

.. you have to balance what you're gonna do [sexually] with whether you are gonna enjoy it or not (Jo)  
Yeah, you'll sort of remember that now, like whether you're gonna get owt out of it (Maisie)  
Why will you remember it? (Interviewer)  
Well ... cos we've been talking about it and it's not shameful to want to enjoy it (Maisie).

These frank disclosures are not typical of SRE with the more usual scenario assuming pleasure is not to be admitted or aspired, for the reasons discussed. But, if the potential for female pleasure is stated as normative as in these and other research conversations (Hirst 2004, Allen 2005b, Formby et al 2009) it takes very little to facilitate disclosures on pleasure. These often counter dominant constructions of passive female sexuality. For example, in the following extract (Hirst 2004) young women's talk on pleasure gave voice to requests for tips on 'spicing up' their sex lives:

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 up (Jo)

Enhancing sexual performance is not naturally an issue that is inclusive of female voices. For most young men, in contrast, proficient sexual performance intended to enhance pleasure is a routinised aspect of learning about sex, particularly through channels, such as pornography or digital media (Formby et al. 2009). SRE which privileges the importance of pleasure for females and males in intimate partnerships makes an unequivocal challenge to the stereotype of the unromantic pleasure seeking male. This brings us to another aspect of sexual competence regarding control and the avoidance of coercion and/or regret.

#### Resisting coercion and avoiding regret - safeguarding

Ninety-one per cent of girls and 61% of boys who had first intercourse aged 13–14 years were not sexually 'competent' and were most likely to express regret according to the UK National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Wellings et al. 2001). Early sexual debut corresponded with more regret and less SRE. The inclusion of pleasure in SRE in relation to issues of coercion and regret has been considered by many - for example, Gavey (1992), Tolman (1994), Ingham (2005), Fine and McClelland (2006), Allen (2011) and others, such as, Carmody (2005) and Beasley (2008) in relation to sexual violence prevention. If pleasure is



asserted as a right and continually reinforced through SRE and issues of safeguarding, young people are more likely to feel vindicated in declining pressure to take part in sexual acts or related activities they are not comfortable with might not enjoy, regret or evoke anxiety. This might mean resisting all sex - penetrative, oral, anal - without a condom, activities such as viewing pornography, or having sex in particular locations. For instance, young women (Hirst 2004) used the right to enjoy sex without worry (and therefore avoiding post-sex regret) as justification for not having sex without a condom:

What if he won't wear a condom? (Interviewer)

You just tell him .. If I'm not gonna enjoy it cos I'm gonna be worrying about it after[wards], then I aint doing it without one [condom] in the first place (Josie).

Equally important, this reason was used to resist male persuasion for sex that deploys romantic discourses:

It's easier to say that than hurting his feelings ... like when he says, 'well, you don't love me' ... you aren't saying that [refusing sex without a condom] cos you don't love him, but, you just don't want the worry (Jo)

Hird and Jackson (2001, 29) stress that sexual coercion and seduction are often of this non-violent, 'if you loved me, you would have sex with me' type. Such narratives encourage female passivity and create scenarios familiar to anyone working with teenagers of pressures to submit to coercion, or, resist and risk losing the partner. The young women quoted above, however, adopted a more pragmatic stance and asserted their agency in being impressed neither by their boyfriend's pretence of love or blackmail, being more concerned to avoid post-sex worries over unsafe sex, and regret that he got 'his way'. By displaying traits more usually associated with males, that is, driven by their own needs and not for love or romance (op. cit. 40), these females (e.g. in Hirst 2004, Allen 2005b, Formby et al. 2009, Maxwell and Aggleton 2012) disrupt traditional constructions of female sexuality. The possibilities for supporting positive female subjectivity and agency suggested by these data justify any SRE strategy that endorses females' rights to pleasure and the avoidance of regret and worry.

Though there is not space to consider masturbation here, it is important to acknowledge its relevance to debates on pleasure and avoiding coercion. Hirst (2012) addresses this in detail but the essential point is that experiencing solo bodily pleasure can raise the bar on what is desired from sex with others. Put simply, if we know what we enjoy, and will strive for, there is more chance of asking for what we want and avoiding the ambiguity mentioned above that can characterise communication in sexual relations. The corollary is to know what is not enjoyed or not wanted, and not to doubt oneself in resisting it. This lends itself to conversations about safeguarding and more extreme forms of coercion and sexual abuse, and thus enhances the potential for seeking support and intervention. As Beasley (2008, 160) concludes in looking at the relationship between pleasure, communication and sexual violence, 'talking about pleasure is not necessarily at odds with safety but instead may well produce it'.

#### Widening sexual repertoires and challenging heteronormativity

Sex-positive SRE also has a role in acknowledging a wider and realistic repertoire of sexual practices and challenging heteronormativity. Traditional sex education, as pointed out earlier, often restricts coverage to the missionary position and penis/vaginal penetration. This renders sex education which does not reflect experience and can enhance normative perceptions of what constitutes 'proper sex', as the following quote illustrates (Hirst 2004):

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 (Ang)

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)

A little more detail is relevant here. These are young women who have experienced only mutual masturbation (or heavy petting) and not vaginal or anal penetration, and they said they enjoyed it because it was pleasurable and safe. But, abnormality (*makes you think you're maybe a bit weird*) implied by the 'proper' sex discourse contributes pressure to 'go all the way'. Together with coercive 'nagging' from boyfriends, the institutionally reinforced notion of 'proper' sex in traditional sex education has potential to undermine these young women's agency and resist penetrative practices that inhere more risks. In contrast, sex-positive SRE promotes pleasurable and health protecting practices and this necessitates widening repertoires to include safer alternatives to vaginal penetration (e.g. stroking, solo and mutual masturbation). SRE that adopts this alternative emphasis on non-penetrative sex is justified in setting a precedent of safer practices that are pleasurable and offer equal pleasure potential for women and men; challenges the primacy of vaginal penetration as the ultimate goal of ('proper'/'normal') sex; and importantly, avoids heteronormative content that depicts only straight couples and both invisibilises LGBTQ students and fails to offer any meaningful content on same sex identities and sexual practices.

#### Critiquing pornography in SRE and pleasure education

Pornography has been addressed previously in calls for a discourse of erotics in sexuality education (Allen 2005b) but the need to discuss pornography in SRE is ever more critical to this rationale given recent research (involving different methods and demographics) that underlines the increased access and viewing of pornography among young people via films and various digital media. Brook et al. (2009) cite data that porn is used as a source of knowledge on sex by two thirds of 13-17 year olds in the UK. Participants in Formby et al. (2009) said pornography was accessed because other modes of learning are not available to them and ostensibly to enhance sexual performance. Sixty per cent of respondents in Brook et al. (2009) reported that viewing pornography can affect their self-esteem and body image and influence their sexual practices. Interviewees in Formby et al. (2009) elucidated that pornography often portrays untypical versions of the body (particularly large/enhanced breasts and penises), sex acts (e.g. prolonged erections) and unsafe sex (condoms are rarely or never used in the materials they had seen). All participants in these studies wanted more SRE, and notably, a majority in Formby et al. wanted pornography to be addressed in SRE because it offers the most appropriate forum for critical debate on power, patriarchy, control, un/safe sex, enhanced bodies and most importantly, exploring alternatives to porn that might enhance sexual pleasure. Some Muslim young men argued (ibid.) that if sexual pleasure formed part of discussions in SRE, together with a balanced critique on pornography, there might be less need to access pornography for information and young people might feel more able to articulate their viewpoint on pornography if it arose in their current and future sex lives.

#### Equality in relationships

A theme running throughout this rationale is equality: SRE that promotes pleasure also encourages relationships and sexual practices that are safer and more equal. As Beasley (2008) asserts: 'We must face growing evidence that promoting pleasure when discussing sex is likely to encourage forms of sexuality that are safer and more egalitarian' (p.160). She also notes that despite considerable literature on heterosexual men's pleasure and the relationship to power, patriarchy and behaviours damaging to women, there is a paucity of evidence on men's accounts of pleasure that signify equality and mutual satisfaction in relationships. Though many women and men could testify that not all men prioritise their own pleasure at the expense of partners, and some will have heard disclosures from young men on the importance of satisfying their partner, there are difficulties in citing data that support positive role models for

heterosexual young men. Allen's (2005b) research includes young men who are an exception to this trend and Sanders' (2008) exploration of male sexual scripts in contexts of commercial sex problematises some assumptions about men. But, more evidence is needed on male heterosexual pleasure that deepens understanding of non-oppressive heterosexuality. Without this, it will be difficult to engage young men in discussions about respect and equality in relationships with women and men. SRE has a specific role here in affirming the importance of negotiation in sexual practices in order to maximise opportunities for female as well as male pleasure, and reciprocity in relationships. A value added outcome is the contribution to exercising a clearer sense of agency and positive sexual subjectivity.

### **Final remarks**

This paper has offered a rationale to support the case for positive sexuality education that includes pleasure and to problematise sex negative approaches. Copious factors have capacity to influence young people's practices and sense of self and these cannot be ignored. But, gendered and heteronormative constructs of sexual identity and practice are particularly significant to the ways in which young people are viewed by selves and others, to learning about sexuality and power balances in relationships. SRE operates alongside these various layers of influence but if it is to have any impact, it must be approached with a commitment to meeting expressed needs and validating the association between sex and pleasure and the positive connotations included in the definition of sexual health (WHO 2006). The paper has offered a case for pleasure and sex-positive SRE that will hopefully assist sex educators to be bold in the face of objectors that continue to maintain the status quo of sex negative sex education for many young people. Sex positive SRE is invigorating for students and staff/parents alike because it is honest, daring and rewarding. The quotation in the title of this paper applies both to sexual practices and SRE. Having said this, caution is advised against creating a 'pleasure imperative' (Allen 2011, 101) that can impose an obligation or benchmark to judge the relative success (or not) of sexual experiences.

There are numerous issues to consider in putting into practice the case for pleasure and positive forms of SRE but, first, those working with young people need to be sufficiently convinced by the rationale above, and to deploy some of the evidence, if they are to be able to make a convincing case to students and other stakeholders.

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<sup>i</sup> See CHIV (2012) *Pleasure: A Booklet for Workers on Why and How to Raise the Issue of Sexual Pleasure in Sexual Health Work with Young people* (2nd ed.) [www.Sexualhealthsheffield.nhs.uk/](http://www.Sexualhealthsheffield.nhs.uk/) and The Pleasure Project website <http://www.thepleasureproject.org/>