

Are We Nearly There Yet? Struggling to Understand Young People as Sexual Subjects

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This paper seeks to explore how the academic concept of 'sexual subjectivity' appears in government Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) publications (researched between 2000 and 2010), and the understandings of key stakeholders. This follows work by Louisa Allen (and others), suggesting that there is a knowledge/practice gap within school-based SRE, which could be addressed by acknowledging young people as legitimate sexual subjects. Although much important work has been written on the concept of sexual subjectivity in wider popular and subcultural contexts, exploring the concept through an analysis of SRE curricula and stakeholders has much to contribute to the narrowing of the knowledge/practice gap. This could contribute to the training and self-reflection of practitioners, as well as assisting them in making the case for more balanced SRE guidelines. I conclude that a more confident and nuanced recognition of young people's sexual subjectivity is also important in the context of contemporary panics over the sexualisation of young people.

Keywords: Sexual subjectivity, Sex and Relationship Education, Personal, Social and Health Education, education policy, discourse analysis

Introduction

Numerous researchers have examined the sexual cultures of schools (such as Kehily 2002; Epstein and Johnson 1998; Mac an Ghail 1996). Within this, Louisa Allen's work has been particularly important in highlighting the gulf between schools' and Sex and Relationship Educations' (SRE) representation of students' sexuality, and young people's¹ actual experiences of it (Allen 2001). In think-

ing through the implications of this knowledge/practice gap, Allen identifies the importance of recognising the sexual subjectivity of young people within SRE (Allen 2008; 2007; 2005; 2001). That is to say, if young people are not positioned discursively as agents in this context, it ultimately hinders the goals of SRE – such as encouraging young people to have safe and positive sexual experiences. This article contributes to this discussion by examining the

extent to which young people are actually positioned as sexual subjects in UK government SRE publications between 2000 and 2010. In addition to this, I examine the understandings of key stakeholders in the development and delivery of SRE. By reflecting on sexual subjectivity in these two interconnected areas, this paper also sheds light on the limited articulation of ideas between academic research, stakeholders, and policy. I reveal that there is only minimal development in the extent to which the government documents acknowledge the sexual subjectivity of young people, though of course producing such guidelines will typically reflect compromises. However the stakeholders – despite having a keen awareness of the knowledge/practice gap – appeared also to undermine their own moves to acknowledge young people’s sexual subjectivity. This is an important insight for stakeholders and researchers to consider as it reveals the way in which discursive patterns can persist despite intentions to the contrary. This is also particularly important given the pressure on SRE from public and political anxiety over cultural sexualisation. It is beyond the scope of this paper to unpick the complex ways in which sexual subjectivity as defined by Allen (2007) intersects with gender, race, ethnicity, class, ability and age. However, it can be seen from my analysis that the government guidelines are a long way

from addressing this complexity as they hardly recognise young people’s sexual subjectivity at all.

Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) in England holds an unusual position within the national curriculum. Split into two parts, the majority of SRE is not statutory and parents have the right to withdraw their children from it (1996 Education Act) up to the age of 19. This includes discussion of issues such as relationships, emotions, contraception, abortion, sexually transmitted infections etc. The non-statutory nature of this part of SRE means provision is limited and extremely variable throughout England (Ofsted 2005). However, schools are required to create and make available their SRE policy (1996 Education Act). Local education authorities also, ‘must have regard to the guidance issued by the Secretary of State’ (2000 Learning and Skills Act) on SRE provision in maintained schools. Primary legislation on SRE is thus limited, meaning guidance produced by the government (for local education authorities, schools and teachers) is significant in structuring provision.

In 2010 the Labour-led Children, Schools and Families Bill attempted unsuccessfully to legislate to raise the status and quality of SRE. This would have capped the age of parental withdrawal at 15, ensuring all young people received at least a year of SRE before leaving school. Although this was unsuccessful,

the attempt marked a significant milestone in mainstream political acceptance of what practitioners and academics have long been saying about the subject – that official recognition of the importance of SRE could contribute to improving and standardising its provision. However, it is unclear to what extent the Bill reflected a greater impact of academic research and debate on SRE policy. Several researchers have analysed and critiqued the 2000 Sex and Relationship Education Guidance (Alldred and David 2007; Monk 2001). This has pointed out its shortcomings from the perspectives of gender, sexuality and young people's rights. This article adds to these insights by analysing the subsequent guidance documents and curriculum outlines of the past 10 years, and specifically evaluating them in relation to their recognition of young people's sexual subjectivity.

Literature Review

A considerable body of academic literature has critiqued the content, style and delivery of school-based SRE since its introduction into the national curriculum in 1986. A key notion is that of a knowledge/practice gap between what young people are taught in SRE and what they actually experience (Allen 2001). Research suggests that SRE is overly focused on the biological and reproductive elements of sexual activity, and over-emphasizes the risks

and dangers. This focus on teenage pregnancy and infection also dominates the evaluation of SRE programmes (Ingham 2005). Ultimately this results in significant absences from SRE; discussion of emotions and relationship dynamics (Measor et al 2000; Lees 1993), information about sexual pleasure and erotics (Allen 2006; 2001; Measor et al 2000), discussion of alternatives to penetrative, vaginal sex (Hirst 2008; Ott et al 2006; Ingham 2005; Epstein and Johnson 1998), or the diversity of sexualities (Corteen 2006; Kehily 2002; Measor et al 2000). Without any discussion of the positive motivations young people may have for engaging in sexual activity (Ott et al 2006; Ingham 2005), their sexual subjectivity is thus constructed as illegitimate.

Strikingly, this account of young people as illegitimate sexual subjects is present at a time when there is considerable interest in how sexuality and sexual imagery takes an increasingly prominent place within contemporary culture. Various authors have highlighted the complexity and ultimately ambivalence of the sexualisation of culture thesis (Gill 2009; Attwood 2006; Plummer 1995), rather than seeing this development as ultimately positive (e.g. McNair 2002) or negative (e.g. Gill 2003). Nonetheless, young people provide the focus of much anxiety in relation to sexualisation and culture (Papadopolous 2010; Buckingham and Bragg 2004). This makes it

particularly important that we interrogate the way subjectivities are shaped in the context of SRE, as a site where political intervention could potentially uncritically reflect public anxiety and close down open discussion.

Research engaging with young people actually challenges the conception of school pupils as asexual. Large-scale research suggests that 30% of young men and 26% of young women report first heterosexual intercourse before the age of 16 (Wellings et al 2001). However, sexual intercourse is not the only way in which sexual subjectivity can be manifest. For example, Mary Jane Kehily has examined the ways in which young people engage in processes of meaning making about sexual identity at school (Kehily 2002). Other researchers have also explored the complex ways in which sexuality is negotiated and enacted within the school setting (Epstein and Johnson 1998; Mac an Ghail 1994). Louisa Allen's work is also important as she has investigated young people's understandings of what it means to be knowledgeable about sex (2001), and what a discourse of erotics might look like (2008; 2006). Young people's views on how sex and relationship education might be improved also reflects their self-positioning as legitimate sexual subjects (Allen 2005; Forrest, Strange and Oakley 2004).

As Louisa Allen's work in particular has highlighted, addressing

the knowledge/practice gap – i.e. making SRE relevant to young people – means acknowledging their sexual subjectivity. Without this, SRE undermines its own aim to encourage agency and positive/safe sexual practice, as it constructs young people as illegitimate sexual subjects (Allen 2008; 2007; 2005; 2001) and in need of moral guidance. With this in mind, this article focuses on the extent to which young people are constructed as sexual subjects within government SRE documents between 2000 and 2010, looking for possible links between this academic research and policy. Previous work has considered the understandings of SRE practitioners, so this article extends this to consider the degree to which a range of stakeholders (including policy-makers and campaigners in this area) regard young people as legitimate sexual subjects. Given the longstanding nature of critical and constructive research on SRE, it is interesting to question whether official guidelines and stakeholders have recognised and absorbed this insight about the knowledge/practice gap and sexual subjectivity.

Key Terms and Conceptual Framework

Discourse analysis offers a useful framework for examining the extent to which guidelines and stakeholders acknowledge the sexual subjectivity of young people. This is because the notion of sexual sub-

jectivity itself, as conceptualised by Allen (2007; 2001), is rooted in an understanding of the significance of discourse in constructing subject positions. Foucault uses discourse to refer to historically specific systems of meaning (Foucault 1972). As such they both reflect and shape social relations (Allen 2008).

The notion of sexual subjectivity is connected both to the notion of discourse and to agency. From a post-structuralist perspective subject positions are produced (at least partly) through discourse. It is as a subject (in this context sexual) that individuals can exercise agency. That is to say, have a sense of autonomy, and capability to enact it through their sexual desires and relationships. Of course structural relations of power also affect people's ability to enact their sexual subjectivity, but it is arguably difficult for SRE to address this. Within the bounds of SRE Allen highlights the need for young people to be discursively positioned as agential sexual subjects. Without this positioning, exhortations that young people practice safe sex will continue to be ineffective.

Foucault's account of power/knowledge is also useful here, as the type of and extent to which knowledge is ascribed to young people is key to their construction as sexual subjects (or not). His conceptualization of knowledge as an effect of discursive power (Foucault 1980) grounds my consideration of the way in which claims about social

problems (in this case young people's sexuality) and their solutions are made and justified (Miller and Rose 2008). This means knowledge is not tied to the accurate experience of an independent reality. Instead, the dominant paradigm or 'episteme' (Foucault 1980, 197) of truth operates to delineate what is and is not comprehensible as knowledge, and who can possess it. Thus from a Foucauldian perspective we can denaturalize the ascription of young people as asexual and in need of instruction.

The method of discourse analysis I will employ to examine government documents and interview transcripts, originates partly in Foucault's conception of discourse within power/knowledge. Discourse analysis then works to place these systems of meaning within broader historical and structural contexts (Howarth 2000). The new meanings produced can then act as a basis for critique and potential transformation.

Method

The discourse analytic approach treats spoken and written testimony as windows into the assumptions and understandings of groups and individuals (Quinn 2010). This hermeneutic endeavor recognizes knowledge production is dependent on interpretation; mediated by the subjectivity of the researcher (McLeod and Thomson 2009), hence the centrality of reflexivity in

the research process. Examining recent history stemmed from a desire to reveal discourses as the medium for making truth claims. More specifically it enabled critical reflection on the categories of young men and women as sexual subjects.

To examine how young people are constructed as sexual subjects in government publications between 2000 and 2010, I selected documents relating to SRE and Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE) for analysis using key word searches of online archives. This included all publications available from the Department for Children, Schools and Families, Department for Education and Employment, and the National Curriculum. Key documents analysed included the 2000 and 2010 guidelines for SRE, the 2004 document PSHE in Practice, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's PSHE curricula, and the 2009 MacDonald review of the proposal to make PSHE statutory.

Seeking to understand how stakeholders of SRE understand young people as sexual subjects, I utilised multiple elements within the sample. Firstly, I identified six key national campaigning organizations through intensity sampling (Roulston 2010). I selected organizations on the basis of their prominence, longevity and involvement with contemporary SRE lobbying. Of the six selected, I interviewed policy workers in four of the organizations. I supplemented these interviews by examining their

organizational documents on SRE, in addition to documents produced by the two organizations that did not participate in interviews.

I also sought to recruit participants working on SRE policy and the recent development attempts within central government. This relied on contacts with other researchers working in this area to identify relevant civil servants, and it was challenging to find contact details for them. I ultimately undertook one interview with a senior civil servant involved in the areas identified.

In order to understand how SRE practitioners understood young people and sexual subjectivity in a local context, I selected an inner-city Local Education Authority. I approached all of its thirteen secondary schools and gained interviews with the Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (including SRE) co-ordinators in two schools. In addition to this I examined their school SRE policies and teaching materials. I also interviewed the borough-wide SRE co-ordinator, and a practitioner working in schools throughout the borough.

I designed flexible, semi-structured interview schedules to last between 30 and 50 minutes. For the analysis of transcripts and documents I followed a discourse analytic approach, stressing the importance of meaning within historical and structural context (Howarth 2000). The approach taken here is situated between the Foucauldian

and realist approaches. The realist approach to discourse retains a stronger place for the material in its account, suggesting 'study of the dynamics which structure texts has to be located in an account of the ways discourses reproduce and transform the material world' (Parker 1992, 1). The Foucauldian in turn emphasizes the contingent and ambiguous nature of social structures (Howarth 2000). The realist element is necessary for my approach which sees the material reality of inequality as something to be identified and challenged. The Foucauldian provides an excellent way to understand the contradiction and contingency found within government texts and their development process.

I familiarised myself thoroughly with the interviews and documents, transcribing the interviews in their entirety. I followed this with three stages of coding (King 2010). First, preliminary descriptive coding where some codes were taken from my initial research questions and others emerged inductively from the data (Roulston 2010). I then re-considered my initial coding and gathered illustrative quotes to assess the volume and interpret the meaning of particular codes. Lastly I considered the larger themes, paying attention to the continuities and contrasts within and between interviews and those of different stakeholders. During analysis I also returned to my research diary and field notes. This allowed me to check and compare

my initial impressions and understandings as time progressed, scrutinizing my own working process.

Analysis – Sex as Singularly Risky

Seeking to assess the extent to which central government publications positioned young people as legitimate sexual subjects, I will now discuss my analysis of the documents sampled. I will show their maintenance of an unbalanced account of sex, their denial of young people's sexual subjectivity in the present, and their undermining of young people as knowing subjects. I will also examine the ways in which various stakeholders constructed the sexual subjectivity of young people from their position to produce and interpret government publications.

The documents reveal a construction of sex as singularly risky. Although not proposing abstinence outright, the benefits of 'delaying' sexual intercourse are frequently reiterated. For example, secondary pupils 'should learn to understand human sexuality, learn the reasons for delaying sexual activity and the benefits to be gained from such delay, and learn about obtaining appropriate advice on sexual health' (DfEE 2000, 4). The notion of risk in relation to sexual intercourse adds to its construction as something fundamentally dangerous to be avoided. The personal wellbeing curriculum at key stage 3 and 4 (QCA 2007a;

b) maintains this perspective, outlining the need for pupils to learn to recognize and reduce risk, particularly in relation to sexual practice. This is not counter balanced by any account of the pleasures or positive elements of sexual relationships. As Allen and others have highlighted, this message does not fit the experience of young people who may have, want or believe in their capacity for sexual pleasure. From a Foucauldian perspective where knowledge is no longer singular, the government documents seek to exert a singular understanding of young people's sexuality as risky. Although this might be the understanding taken by schools, it fails to engage with the ways young people might seek to resist or contradict it.

Another persistent theme adding to the sense of anxiety in the texts is that of protection or safety. Even in many of the most recent documents (DfCSF 2009; Macdonald 2009), the protective argument for SRE remains prevalent. The national documents are overwhelmingly focused on the avoidance of STIs (sexually transmitted infections) and pregnancy. For example, 'the key task for schools is, through appropriate information and effective advice on contraception and on delaying sexual activity, to reduce the incidence of unwanted pregnancies' (DfEE 2000, 16). Avoiding STIs and teenage pregnancy are presented as health promotion. This portrayal of SRE as contributing to

'healthy' pupils is arguably the most significant emphasis within the texts examined, and endures over time. Yet this notion of health as purely infection and pregnancy-free is a limited one, ignoring the psychological and social elements of health. As with the government's teenage pregnancy agenda (SEU 1999), the National Healthy School Standard (introduced in October 1999) emphasizes the imbrication of healthy pupils and effective SRE.

This health focus is maintained in the 2009 independent review of PSHE which states pupils need information and skills 'to help them grow and develop as individuals, as members of families and society so that they can live safe, healthy, productive and responsible lives' (Macdonald 2009, 13). The 2010 guidelines continue the centrality of health, the introduction emphasizing 'the contribution that good quality SRE makes to helping young people deal with the health challenges they face in adolescence' (DfCSF 2010, 1). Critiques of public health and education from a Foucauldian perspective have highlighted the control exercised through these discursive regimes. Instead of enabling young people to develop and enact their own sexual subjectivity, they work to produce subjects engaged in self-regulation in line with the aims and morality of central government. Framing the guidelines around a discourse of health also serves to bolster their legitimacy as relating to

medical science. The goal of health, backed by the episteme of scientific knowledge behind it, becomes unanswerable in the context of SRE, especially by young people themselves.

What makes this risk and health focused construction of sexuality and sexual practice so powerful is the lack of any alternative within the texts (Ingham 2005). The benefits or pleasures of sexual relationships of any sort are largely unmentioned. Delayed, heterosexual, reproductive sex (ideally within marriage) can easily be identified as the only acceptable form of sexual act². This one-sided perspective on young people's sexual relationships contributes to their construction as illegitimate sexual subjects.

The analysis of my interview data in some ways serves to temper this unbalanced account of young people's sexual relationships. The idea of involving young people in planning SRE as a way to address the knowledge/practice gap (Allen 2001) (and recognize their sexual subjectivity) emerged clearly from the data. The understanding that the knowledge/practice gap makes SRE less effective was repeatedly mentioned across the different groups, and arguably illustrates some recognition of young people as sexual subjects. For example, one participant remarked:

you've got to engage young people with the subject and if you're

not dealing with the reality of their lives you're not gonna engage them with it (David – civil servant).

Along the same lines, another participant commented:

one of the things is actually about the reality for young people and when you only talk to them about disease and prevention and condoms and not getting pregnant, and then they engage in sexual activity and actually quite enjoy it – the two don't sort of match in a way...It kind of just doesn't ring true for young people and they're very good at spotting where people are not telling the truth. So you know it kind of almost undermines some of the messages (Jane – NGO worker).

There was also recognition of the knowledge young people already possess:

I think the sex side of things a lot of them know, a lot of them, they don't necessarily know all of it, but they're quite, the young people of today are quite knowledgeable (Claire – School SRE co-ordinator).

This reflects a degree of sharing in the academic notion of sexual subjectivity. However, the knowledge ascribed to young people still largely remained restricted to the biological, physical elements of sex-

ual practice. This arguably reflects the Cartesian hierarchy of knowledge prevalent within educational establishments (Paechter 2006), where the mind is separate from and privileged over the body. This means that knowledge of the physical elements of sexuality is regarded as the least valuable. Assumptions were also made about pupils' capacity for critical thinking, as they were seen as in need of instruction in the moral and emotional aspects of relationships. This account of young people as amoral is not only inaccurate (Thomson 1994), but reflects the historic role of the state in conceptualizing young people as in need of moral training. We can see here the operation of power/knowledge restricting who is deemed the subject of knowledge (and of what sort), undermining young people, as the cerebral understanding of relationships and values remains monopolized by adults.

The manner in which young people were to be engaged to close the knowledge/practice gap also remained restricted by the regulative process of 'needs assessment'. At the borough level, the structure of these assessments arguably impacts significantly on what is 'sayable' by pupils. To assess what pupils want to learn in SRE they are asked to choose from a range of options. However, the options are different depending on the age group being assessed (years 7/8 or years 9/11), reflecting the existing curriculum for

these age groups. Thus the problems with the existing guidelines and curriculum are replicated. There is no mention of desire or pleasure, further reducing their visibility as valid suggestions to counteract the focus on risk. For years 7/8 this is followed by, 'Is there anything else that you think people your age need to know about?' This could potentially allow young people to offer suggestions, but remains framed in terms of age appropriateness. While acknowledging that young people of differing ages may well have different needs, from a Foucauldian perspective, we can see the practice of needs assessment as partly implicated in the circumscription of knowledge (about what young people want and need in SRE).

The topics young people may contribute to are also restricted to content and style, as this quote illustrates:

not on policy but on kind of the content, as I say the needs assessment it was very much looking at, it was what did they want to know, what did they need to know and what should they know and kind of looking at all of that (Claire – School SRE co-ordinator).

Thus what pupils *want to* and *should* know remains distinct, and SRE knowledge remains driven by the moral ideals of adults. The tension is evident between the demand

that pupils take responsibility for themselves, and the denial of their opinion on the foundational policy, i.e. their rights to SRE. Here individualisation (of responsibility) can be seen as working to contain rather than facilitate the agential sexual subjectivity of young people.

One might also wish to consider the ways in which notions of childhood play out in relation to the teaching of apparently controversial subject matter with substantial moral signifiers. As we discussed needs assessment, practitioners constantly raised the issue of 'age appropriateness' as guiding which ideas from pupils they would act on. Thus age becomes a moralizing regulator to legitimate the marginalization of young people's opinions. For example, one participant expressed regarding pupil feedback:

And if it's relevant, if it's appropriate, you know we wouldn't necessarily teach a year 7 about the full details of sexually transmitted diseases...So it becomes I would say, age appropriate (Claire – School SRE co-ordinator).³

Although the issue of age in relation to SRE provision is in itself an area of debate, the stress on the futurity of young people's sexuality does not even seem to acknowledge that 16 is the current legal age of consent for sexual intercourse. Given that 16 is currently the median age for first intercourse, we might

also speculate that young people could well have had sexual desires and experiences prior to this. This arguably supports the notion that discourses around needs assessment, age appropriateness and the futurity of young people's sexuality have more to do with rejecting the sexual subjectivity of young people, than seeking to engage with nuances of development within this.

Future Sexual Subjects

The illegitimacy of young people as sexual subjects is reinforced by the way sex is constructed as something they will experience in the future, following delay. SRE is portrayed as preparing them for adult life, rather than their lives at present, potentially including sexual relationships. On one hand the 2010 SRE guidelines (DfCSF 2010) display a significantly increased mention of the positive benefits of relationships. However, examined closely, such mention is always of supportive relationship benefits, rather than physical or erotic pleasure. Such benefits also remain firmly fixed in the future of young people's lives when they are adults. For example, schools and parents want children to 'be *able as an adult* to enjoy the positive benefits of loving, rewarding and responsible relationships' (DfCSF 2010, 5) (my italics). Also, that young people should be able to 'delay until they are able to enjoy and take responsibility to ensure positive physical and emotional ben-

efits of intimate loving relationships' (DfCSF 2010, 13). Thus the guidelines still fail to address the sexual reality young people experience at school. This is especially true when we consider secondary school pupils and findings that suggest the median age of first intercourse is 16, with around 30% of respondents reporting intercourse before this (Wellings et al 2001). We could also add to this the engagement young people will have had with cultural and media representations of sex and relationships.

In contrast to the government documents, the interview data revealed support for the inclusion of positive accounts of sex and desire in SRE. Many interviewees identified how this linked to presenting a more balanced view of the realities of sexual relationships. As the most enthusiastic participant responded:

I think you've actually hit the nail on the head. We've got to recognize that young people and children can be sexual beings (Tom – NGO worker).

It seemed that this idea was one which could be incorporated into their existing understandings of the requirements of SRE (if it wasn't already), although not always as explicitly as this quote implies.

Although this suggests recognition of young people as sexual subjects, it was not a dominant theme. As discussed previously, the notion

of age-appropriateness provides a temporal brake on what is/is not considered appropriate sexual knowledge for young people. Framing young people's sexuality as only happening in the future provides a second constraint on the recognition of their subjectivity. This diffuses the power of the acknowledgement that young people can have legitimate desire and positive sexual experiences. This was particularly evident in discussions at the level of NGOs and policy-making. For example:

I think it sets you up to have good well-balanced meaningful relationships *in the future* (Sarah – NGO worker) (my italics).

Equally:

I mean I think SRE very much to me is about *preparing children and young people for real life, adult life*, the world. And I think generally that's what schools are supposed to do; equip children and young people with skills *so they can go and have jobs and be proper people* (Jane – NGO worker) (my italics).

Also, explicitly referring to sexual relationships:

I want my children to have happy fulfilling sex lives in their partnerships *when they're older* you know and I don't think, and parents would, that's what you would

want for your children (David – civil servant) (my italics).

This temporal register may provide a way for actors to distance themselves from the controversial reality of young people's sexuality. Yet it seriously undermines their attempts to address the knowledge/practice gap. If we consider Heidegger's notion of *dasein* – where past, present and future intermingle, as we must apprehend the former and latter in the present (McLeod and Thomson 2009) – this full understanding of being a subject is rejected in the discourse surrounding SRE. We cannot expect positive agency from young people when the discourses and practice of SRE position them as partial, inadequate subjects.

Peer Pressure, Knowledge, and Rationality

The undermining of young people's sexual subjectivity is also illustrated in discussions about peer influence. For example, 'resisting unwanted peer pressure' (DfCSF 2010, 11) is mentioned repeatedly from 2000 to 2010. It is recommended that teachers 'link sex and relationship education with issues of peer pressure and other risk-taking behaviour' (DfEE 2000, 10). In the 2010 guidelines this continues including the suggestion that pupils think about, 'what are some of the influences on our choices about sex and relationships and how can I deal

with peer pressure?' (DfCSF 2010, 34). Thus peer influence is regarded as almost singularly negative 'pressure', exhorting young people to have risky, unhealthy sex. Without denying the occurrence of negative peer pressure on some young people, the national documents minimize the positive role peers might have. Mention of peer educators provides a rare positive counterweight to this, but is only briefly discussed in both the 2000 and 2010 guidelines. The more recent guidelines do present a slightly more positive perspective on peer education, suggesting it can give 'small groups of young people an opportunity to enhance their knowledge and skills' (DfCSF 2010, 47). This contrasts with the 2000 guidelines that state 'peer education does not seem to have an impact on the development of skills and positive attitudes and values' (DfEE 2000, 28).

By failing to fully acknowledge the ambivalence of peer relations, the texts suggest that young people are uncritical vessels of peer influence, without individual agency or insight as sexual subjects. There does not appear to be awareness of the contradiction inherent in insisting peer influence is negative, while demanding young people should as individuals act to responsibly ignore it and delay sexual relationships. Young people are also arguably simultaneously peers and individual subjects. From the perspective of Allen's sexual subjectivity, the

guidelines hardly recognise young people. This is underpinned by a problematic epistemology insistent on singular truth, in contrast to post-structuralist perspectives which have highlighted the multiple and constructed nature of knowledge.

A similar negative construction of young people is evident in the portrayal of information and its validity. A clear hierarchy is constructed throughout the documents, with information provided by peers firmly resigned to the lowest tiers. Here the Foucauldian concept of power/knowledge helps to clarify the way in which this hierarchy, and construction of young people as invalid sources of knowledge, serves to delegitimize them as sexual subjects. The 2004 resource pack for teachers states that PSHE develops:

critical skills that would enable them to identify 'persuaders' and influences. Pupils can identify key messages, facts or information and assess their validity. In addition to the media young people are much influenced by what they believe their friends are doing... They tend to believe that their friends are behaving in ways that are more 'risky' than are likely to be true and this in turn puts pressure on them to experiment. Normative education is an approach that attempts to challenge beliefs and myths and to give young people correct information about what their peers are doing (DfES 2004, 10).

This extract encapsulates the lack of discernment and agency ascribed to young people, coupled with a denigration of their own knowledge. The official knowledge provided by schools is simultaneously rendered as unquestionable. The hierarchy of knowledge and mistrust of young people is also reflected in the more recent consultation process, as parents are also reported as considering information from peers as wholly inaccurate (DfCSF 2009).

The subject emphasized throughout the texts is one of rational individualism. This aligns with the simplistic version of a health psychology behaviour model that underlies the SRE recommendations (Stone and Ingham 2006). This model suggests that given the correct factual information, young people will choose to modify their behaviour; i.e. have delayed and protected sex. Thus, individual control and responsibility is demanded constantly from young people, arguably reflecting the individualisation which has been theorised as characteristic of the contemporary social world (Bauman 2001). For example, 'in order to be able to take responsibility for their actions, young people need to be more generally aware of the law in relation to sexual activity and local confidential services' (DfEE 2000, 31). Learning to take responsibility is also defined as one of the key elements of learning within PSHE (DfES 2004) and this continues in the 2010 guidelines. This model refuses to acknowledge the com-

plexity of influences on behaviour, or indeed the alternative rationalities that might be used in decision-making. In epistemological terms, the poststructuralist exposure of rationality as one logic among many, rather than the ultimate path to true knowledge reveals the limitations of an approach that cannot see desire, fantasy or curiosity as coherent modes of operation, and indeed can barely even acknowledge them. Foucault has also highlighted the way in which individualisation, arguably at play here, can act as a tool for the engineering of normalized conduct through self regulation (Foucault 1977). The limited attempt made in the documents to acknowledge this complexity (such as peer pressure discussed above) does nothing but reinforce the idea that non-rational influences should be resisted without discussion. While responsibility is exhorted, young people are simultaneously framed as passive vessels to be filled with the correct information, as a quote from a parent participant in government research exemplifies: 'they need to be educated on what is right and wrong' (DfCSF 2009, 11). This is later supported by the statement, 'SRE is learning about our bodies, our health and our relationships. It should be taught gradually based on factually accurate information' (DfCSF 2010, 1). The underlying ontology within the documents is internally inconsistent, on one hand stressing the individual responsibility and agency of young people,

while simultaneously denying their sexual subjectivity, knowledge and agency. We might have expected practitioners working on the ground to be better able to see this, but as I have suggested, they were also silent on the issue.

Human Rights and Parent Power

Another way in which young people are both supported and undermined as legitimate sexual subjects is through the discourse of rights. Within the research literature, the argument for improved and standardized SRE on the basis of young people's rights is clearly present (Thomson 1994). However, it is only in the most recent review (Macdonald 2009) and guidelines (DfCSF 2010) that the language of rights in relation to young people begins to become visible as PSHE is described as 'a common entitlement' (Macdonald 2009, 16). As mentioned above, this arguably reflects the limited transition of ideas from the academic world to more mainstream politics, as seen in the recent attempt to make PSHE and SRE statutory.

At present there is a notable conflict expressed between the rights of parents and of young people. Parents' opinions, values and co-operation are constantly referred to, here prioritized: '[e]very parent and every school wants to see children grow up safely and be able as an adult to enjoy the positive benefits of loving, rewarding and responsible relationships' (DfCSF 2010, 5).

They, rather than young people, are regarded as the clients of SRE. The document reporting on research about SRE with parents tellingly titled, 'Customer Voice Research' (DfCSF 2009) clearly signals this. Strangely, this very research highlights the reluctance of parents to have a role in SRE, few seriously discussing such issues with their children. It seems odd then that parents are repeatedly focused upon given their lack of engagement with SRE. Thus it would appear that although a discourse of human rights is increasingly being used to support SRE provision, the deeper implications of young people's rights – their sexual subjectivity – are not really reflected in the guidelines.

Conclusion

In this article I have sought to examine the extent to which government SRE guidelines (between 2000 and 2010), and SRE stakeholders, acknowledge young people as legitimate sexual subjects. This acknowledgement has been seen as an important component in closing the knowledge/practice gap in SRE (Allen 2001), and enabling young people to enact sexual agency (including the negotiation and practice of safe sex).

I found that government documents generally maintained an unbalanced view of sexual activity as almost singularly negative and risky. They framed SRE within a discourse of health promotion, and

implied that young people should delay sexual behaviour, rather than acknowledging their sexual subjectivity in the present. These conditions limited the benefits of the slight increase in the positive mention of young people's relationships between 2000 and 2010, as they remained restricted to the future. The hierarchy of knowledge further undermined the acknowledgment of the legitimate sexual subjectivity of young people. This positioned young people as unreliable and in need of moral guidance, with the government guidelines and information provided by teachers or parents the singular truth. The recognition of young people's sexual subjectivity within government documents does not appear to have grown hugely within the last 10 years, suggesting the limited adoption of this academic insight.

Interviews with stakeholders were more mixed. In comparison to the texts, they largely showed an acute awareness of the knowledge/practice gap – and the need to address this through recognising the sexual subjectivity, desire and experience of young people. However, young people's questionable legitimacy as knowing subjects, the notion of 'age appropriateness' and the positioning of their sexual relationships in the future still served to undermine their sexual subjectivity in the present.

My research suggests that although aware of the need to ad-

dress the knowledge/practice gap, and attempting to do so, stakeholders may not be aware of the extent to which they simultaneously undermine this discursively. The notion of sexual subjectivity could potentially be useful for practitioners as a tool for reflecting on their own experiences of working with young people and perhaps opening up discussion about the uses and limits of the government guidelines. For those engaged in seeking to develop local or national SRE guidelines, thinking through sexual subjectivity could also assist in explaining the necessity of a more consistent approach to bridging the knowledge/practice gap. As I hope is now evident, this is by definition much more than an academic debate. Without changing particular discourses, SRE will continue to undermine its aim to enable young people to make positive and informed choices. It is also vital that this insight is included in debates on young people and the sexualisation of culture.

Acknowledgements

With many thanks to Jo-Anne Dillabough, Gillian Bendelow, Alison Phipps and Margaretta Jolly, as well as the anonymous reviewers – for their invaluable and constructive comments. Great thanks also to those who participated in the research.

Endnotes

¹ I refer to young people or pupils through-

out this paper, in order to encompass the range of ages involved in secondary education – roughly the second decade of life. This spans the official age of consent for sexual intercourse in the UK, which is 16. The use of ‘young people’ as opposed to children stems from an approach that problematises age as the sole indicator of capacity and recognises that agency and subjectivity are not solely the preserve of people over 18 (O’Donovan 2000). Where children are referred to (other than in quotation) it is not to make a distinction of age, but to mark the relationship young people have with their parents. Definitions of children, and childhood are laden with assumptions of incapacity and asexuality – which has been discussed in depth elsewhere (Waites 2005; Heinze 2000; O’Donovan 2000; Piper 2000; Jackson 1982). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to detail this literature and I am focusing on secondary education, it is important to note that it is arguable that both capacity and sexuality are present throughout the lifecourse (Hawkes and Egan 2010; O’Donovan 2000), even if in varying degrees and forms.

² Although it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss it fully here, it is important to note that the documents hardly mention gender at all, and when they do, it is understood as biological sex. They focus on women’s bodies as problematic in relation to puberty and reproduction, and are unambivalently heteronormative.

³ Ultimately, gaining a real understanding of this consultation with young people would require research directly engaging them. Although aware of this, ethics committee advice did not concur. The protective argument given in response to my proposal to engage with ‘vulnerable’ sixth form pupils on ‘risky’ topics has been documented more widely (see Louisa Allen 2009.) In my sample of NGOs I ensured three of them worked specifically with under-twenty-fives, in the hope of rectifying this silence to some extent.

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