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

Julia Hirst*

Department of Psychology, Sociology and Politics, Faculty of Development and Society, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK

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Pleasure as a component of sexualities and relationships education (SRE) has been subject to much recent discussion. Arguably, academic debate has been more prominent than practitioner perspectives, with theoretical articulations and critique superseding pragmatic attention to integrating pleasure into learning about sexualities and relationships. Though there are exceptions, sexuality education that recognises pleasure and desire for young people remains absent in many contexts, despite calls for its inclusion for more than two decades. This paper offers a synthesis of expert opinion to outline the importance of pleasure and positive SRE to sexual health, rights, equality and safeguarding against coercion and harm. The paper acknowledges the often uneasy associations between sexuality, education and youth by identifying key political and academic debates, before offering a rationale on ways forward that may help persuade curriculum gatekeepers of its merits. Analysis focuses mainly on young women with reflections on current knowledge and the need for more empirically based research and theorising on boys and men. Policy developments relate to the UK, though issues raised have direct relevance for contexts where SRE is similarly contested.

Keywords: sex education; gender equality; pleasure; sexual health; young people; UK

Introduction

Education on sexualities and relationships aims to support young people’s social, sexual and emotional well-being. This paper argues that to be useful, positive notions of sexualities and relationships education (SRE) should be central to what is offered. Although there are numerous reasons for involvement in sexual practices, pleasure is significant. For some time, literature has highlighted that sexuality education should include attention to pleasure and the positive aspects of intimacy. Fine’s (1988) and Tolman’s (1994) papers on the absence of discourses, fearing to speak of desire and/or experiencing pleasure among women and girls are two seminal papers among many (see below) that paved the way for recognition of this issue. In practice, this has not yet occurred in many parts of the world that still contest and obstruct comprehensive sexuality education recognising pleasure and desire (Alldred 2012), especially for girls and women but also boys and men (Martino and Frank 2006).

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to offer a clear synthesis of numerous authors’ ideas to outline the importance for sexual and emotional health, rights, equality and safeguarding against coercion and harm. It is intended to support those who have not had

*Email: j.hirst@shu.ac.uk

access or seen the gains from this work, and to help justify the merits of a sex-positive approach as an alternative to more traditional models of sex education. Analysis focuses mainly on young women because contemporary sexualities, pleasure and gender inequalities remain conflicted for some women/girls. Men receive less attention but are not neglected entirely since their role must be acknowledged in achieving equality and mutual satisfaction in relationships.

Among factors significant to what is termed variously as ‘comprehensive’ or ‘positive’ SRE, pleasure has been highlighted by affiliates in a range of disciplines and geographic contexts, for example Vance (1984), Tolman (2002), Irvine (2002), Ingham (2005), Allen (2005b), Schalet (2011a, 2011b) and numerous others. Given that pleasure was highlighted as an omission in discourses of female sexuality more than 20 years ago (Fine 1988), its ongoing exclusion from much sexuality and relationships education in schools is difficult to justify (Fine and McClelland 2006) for reasons that this paper will address. Literature does underline some excellent practice, for instance, in the USA (Schalet 2011b), the Netherlands (Vanwesenbeeck 2012), Denmark (Rose 2005) and Sweden (Sherlock 2012). Macdonald’s (2009) review noted pockets of excellent practice in the UK, but little evidence that this occurs in more than a minority of schools. Overall, although there has been increasing recognition of female pleasure, in some countries, it cannot be assumed to apply in all schools and/or states (Vanwesenbeeck 2012). This slow progress towards meeting 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 (SEF 2005, 1). The emphasis on relationships, feelings and skills distinguishes this type of education, as reflected in the change of name from sex education to SRE which was driven by young people (SEF 2000).

Regarding sexual health more generally, the World Health Organisation’s working 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 and holistic terms:

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 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, well-being 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 on skills and processes that can support and equip young people to negotiate positive outcomes and protect their sexual health. In the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark, this approach is largely uncontested in school curricula. In parts of the UK, the USA, New Zealand and other Anglophone countries, this is not straightforward because of disputes and debates that have endured over the last half-century (Allred 2012; Irvine 2002). This paper

summarises some features of these debates, then offers a rationale to support SRE based on a positive model that includes pleasure.

Methods

This paper draws on a range of evidence and theoretical ideas. However, empirical studies directly relevant to the focus of the paper are not extensive. Pertinent data from studies wherein sexual subjectivity and/or pleasure has resonance, though not the primary focus, are cited. Some points are illustrated by verbatim quotes taken from a recent qualitative study (Hirst 2004) on socialising, sexual practices and sex education among 15–16-year-old students from a state secondary school in a city in England. Participants comprised 11 young women and 4 young men. Data collection occurred during lunchtime and after school, on school premises. Methods deployed were four focus groups (Morgan 1997) comprising all 15 participants (45–60 minutes), three semi-structured interviews (single and mixed gender) and five individual interviews involving only girls (60–90 minutes). Interviews followed Kvale's (1996) approach in being more akin to conversations and allowing ample latitude for responses.

Participants disclosed only heterosexual experiences and confirmed themselves as straight. The ethnicities (as described by participants themselves) included African–Caribbean, Irish, Pakistani, Somali and white. This variable is not discussed in this paper. Verbatim extracts have been anonymised and attributed via pseudonyms and represent female participants only. This is because girls volunteered for more interview sessions than boys, and single-sex sessions with girls yielded more data significant to pleasure and SRE. Since the number of participants in the sample is small, there are obvious limitations to the generalisability of findings. This said, quotes are used highly selectively and only where they offer a unique insight or where directly relevant data are not available from other studies.

Political and academic debates

Sex education remains controversial in many countries. While the UK and USA have witnessed particularly fierce political disputes, politics has been largely absent in countries such as the Netherlands where debate has remained at the level of ideas and localised decision-making (Lewis and Knijn 2002). Hampshire and Lewis (2004) detail Second World War policy-makers' attempts to improve sex education in British schools in response to increasing incidence of STIs. Sex education, at this point and for the ensuing two decades, was viewed as a solution to public health problems. The 1960s, in contrast, witnessed resistance with politicians and traditionalists opposing sex education because of its alleged potential to corrupt young minds and encourage sexual behaviour. Thus was born the furore that conflates sex education with opposition to reform from those keen to maintain traditional 'family' values and protect the 'innocence' of children (Jackson 1996). Controversies and disagreements have endured, with opponents still seeing sex education as a *problem* and proponents seeing it as a *solution* to public health problems (Hampshire and Lewis 2004). Concomitant permutations of government policy and practice in the UK and other countries, where SRE is contentious, have followed this pattern of dispute with a resultant lack of demonstrable progress in meeting needs and contributing to improved outcomes for sexual health.

The turn of the twenty-first century marked renewed momentum 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 (e.g. Allen 2005a; Fine and McClelland 2006; Higgins and Hirsch 2007; Ingham 2005; Martinez 2009; Tolman 2002). Within UK politics, the default to omitting pleasure (and bearing no relation to the WHO definition of sexual health) was recognised in an admission of a ‘crisis’ in sexual health. As Evans (2006, 237) observed, ‘Official [government] documents may promote “safe” sex, and sometimes “abstinence” from sex, but never “pleasurable” sex’. Nevertheless, the adversarial status of sex education in the UK continues, with plans for compulsory entitlement abandoned with the change of government in 2010. Content and approaches vary and are likely to divide opinion for the foreseeable future. Arguments move now to some academic aspects germane to these divisions in opinion.

Traditional models 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; lack of attention to relationships and social contexts for sex; vaginal penetration is often the only sexual act addressed; and heterosexuality tends to be assumed with lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and questioning (LGBTQ) young people being minimally or completely unacknowledged. In extreme cases, including ‘abstinence’ approaches, there is silence around pleasure and desire, with no discussion of contraception other than to emphasise failure rates or condemn their use (Avert 2012). A review of studies (Avert 2012) highlights that robust evaluations have not been carried out in the UK. Notable studies in the USA include evaluations by Santelli et al. (2006) and Jeffries et al. (2010) of ‘abstinence-only’ programmes, which concluded that they had not proved effective in bringing about risk reduction or protecting health in the longer term. Moreover, credibility is lacking because abstinence models do not match young people’s expressed needs. They want SRE (as distinct from sex education) that is positive, realistic and age appropriate (Coleman and Testa 2007; Forrest, Strange, and Oakley 2004; UK Youth Parliament 2007), with more emphasis on relationships and power dynamics and SRE that engages with sexual pleasure (Allen 2005a; Formby, Hirst, and Shipton 2009; Hirst 2004; Schalet 2011b; Tolman 2012). Reports on educational standards and SRE and personal, social, health and economic education (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).

Nonetheless, it remains the case in many contexts that personal and/or religious views (of parents, head teachers, politicians, etc.) can supersede guidance on best practice for SRE. Objectors hamper progress by deploying many of the same arguments as the anti-permissive lobbyists of the 1960s mentioned above. Goldman (2008) addresses a selection of these, and chief among them is the aforesaid desire to ‘protect’ young people because of the belief that sexual knowledge is dangerous and might encourage experimentation. This can manifest in silence on sex and sexual identity or input that is too late, biological and heteronormative. 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 (Martin 1996; Tolman 2002) with rights, ‘to act upon their sexual desires and express and explore their sexuality in positive ways (that is in ways that do not involve the coercion, exploitation or abuse of others)’ (Allen 2005b, 62). With appropriate debate, information, support and youth-friendly services, young people can be empowered to protect their current and future

sexual selves. Such an approach requires SRE that is student-centred. Many schools (certainly in the UK) fail in this respect (Ofsted 2007, 7). This contravenes the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989) in the routinised failure to honour young people's rights. The ensuing rationale enshrines this commitment to be student-centred with methods that support sexual subjectivity, agency and sexual rights (Corrêa, Petchesky, and Parker 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

The following rationale focuses on schools and has relevance for formal and informal interactions with young people in other settings. Elements of the rationale are introduced in turn.

Skills and competencies for sexual health

Notions of competency for sexual health (Hirst 2008; Ingham 1998; Wellings et al. 2001) are not simple and there is no gold standard. In brief, competency implies 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. It follows that a successful and positive sexual experience is one that involves feeling in control and without post-sex worries regarding STIs and/or conception. Of relevance here, Higgins and Hirsch (2007) stressed the 'pleasure deficit' (133), contraception, discomfort with sexual selves and power imbalances as factors that mitigate against female sexual autonomy and sexual and reproductive health. Similarly, Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck's (2006, 125) sexual subjectivity inventory highlighted the importance of female sexual body esteem and expectations of pleasure (for self and partner). The issue for SRE is how to support young people's sexual subjectivity, autonomy and competence to protect their sexual health and well-being. 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 dangers of sex and the negative consequences for health will deter sex or promote safer sex. This is problematic because the protection of health is not proven to motivate either safer sex or abstaining from sex. Alongside guilt, religiosity, parental views and saving oneself for marriage, abstinent youth cite health as a motivator (Abbott and Dalla 2008). However, for already sexually active youth, other factors 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 approaches that recognise pleasure also have critical importance for HIV/STI prevention initiatives (Boyce et al. 2007). Successful programmes often stress the creative and pleasurable aspects of sex with open and honest discussion being vital. Likewise, Philpott, Knerr, and Maher (2006) reported barriers to pleasure as the main factor in the non-use of condoms and recommended that successful condom strategies should stress pleasure as well as protection, rather than the more usual focus on the risks to health of sex without condoms. SRE has a vital role in reinforcing narratives that equate

condom use with pleasure. In this respect, some useful resources are available (see CHIV 2011, 2012; The Pleasure Project, <http://www.thepleasureproject.org/>).

Using condoms in ways to increase sensation and sustain use is not necessarily straightforward, as is negotiating any form of safer sex, and effective use is more likely 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. Higgins and Hirsch (2008) remind us of the intersections between pleasure, power and social inequality with gender and social class determining preferences, choices and outcomes. Recognition of inequalities in power, gender and material circumstances is of utmost importance in education and communication on pleasure and contraceptive practices. This brings us to the issues of gendered silences and constructions of sexual identities and practices.

Challenging constructs of sexual identities, practices and silence on female pleasure

Gender is hugely significant in the matrix of heterosexual relations, sex and pleasure (Smart 1996; Tolman 2012). Through endorsing pleasure as salient to sexual health, there is the opportunity for SRE to challenge sociocultural expectations of femininity and masculinity (Lenskyj 1990; Martin 1996) and the ‘institutionalised heteronormativity’ (Richardson 2000, 20) that is common to traditional sex education programmes. Problematisation of the silence around female pleasure is key to this issue.

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 as loose and sullied desirers of sex (Hird and Jackson 2001). Although data document young women’s pleasure in their solo or partnered sexual experiences (e.g. Allen 2005b; Hirst 2004; Hogarth and Ingham 2009), Farquhar and Das’s (1999, 51) point about ‘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’ is still pertinent. Similarly, Smart noted in 1996:

It is hard to imagine sex educators today daring to speak openly of pleasure and joy, or of discussing the benefits of young women learning to masturbate, so they know their own bodies before they experiment with another person. (175)

Copious other literature has evidenced this phenomenon (e.g. Fine and McClelland 2006; Holland et al. 1998; Lamb 2010; Lenskyj 1990), that gendered constructs position females with less rights to pleasure than men in many contexts, including the classroom. This ensures that Fine’s (1988) concept of the ‘missing discourse of desire’ is as relevant today as it was more than 20 years ago. The following comments from two female students, aged 15 and 16 (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 quotation illustrates different reflections of the same problem that are implicit in traditional approaches. First, no space is usually afforded – figuratively or literally – to legitimise girls’ 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 (see for instance, Allen 2005a and Hogarth and Ingham 2009), 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 (Martino and Frank 2006). The silence around pleasure and omission of any recognition of young women’s 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 an early marker in the rite of passage to sexual manhood. That some practitioners still mark it with an 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 and illustrated pictorially with images of a woman positioned submissively under a man. Heteronormativity is also reinforced through this type of content (this point is developed in discussion below). Cumulatively, the effect of silences and lack of active or agentic female sexual scripts can deter young women 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 though not female pleasure. This will prevent some young women from seeking 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 that is equal to male assumptions of pleasure.

Such a stance has implications for developing sexual competence, in the right to pleasurable experiences, and 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 sex education with the more usual scenario assuming pleasure is not to be admitted or aspired to for the reasons suggested above. However, if the potential for female pleasure is stated as normative, as in these and other research conversations (Allen 2005b; Formby, Hirst, and Shipton 2009), it takes very little to facilitate disclosures on pleasure. An unexpected outcome is that such discussions can evoke comments that 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 characteristically an issue that includes female voices. For most young men, in contrast, there is an expectation that learning about sex is intended to enhance pleasure and sexual performance (Hyde et al. 2005), particularly through channels such as pornography or digital media (Formby, Hirst, and Shipton 2009). SRE that privileges the importance of pleasure for females and males in intimate partnerships makes an unequivocal challenge to the stereotype of the unromantic pleasure-seeking man.

Resisting coercion and avoiding regret – safeguarding

Ninety-one per cent of girls and 61% of boys who had first intercourse at age 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. Though early sexual experience correlates to a greater degree with lack of competence, supporting the development of sexual competence and resilience to unwanted pressures is crucial for women and men of all ages.

The inclusion of pleasure in SRE does not disregard the fact that people are involved in sex for numerous reasons with many sex acts forced, non-consensual or regretted, as addressed by many, for example Gavey (1992), Tolman (1994), Ingham (2005), Fine and McClelland (2006), and Allen (2011) and authors such as Martin (1996), 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 (Tolman 2012). For some, this might mean resisting all penetrative sex (vaginal, anal, oral) without a condom, activities such as viewing pornography, or having sex in particular locations. For instance, young women may use the right to enjoy sex without worry (and therefore avoiding post-sex regret) as justification for not having sex without a condom (Hirst 2004):

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 ain’t 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) reiterate that sexual coercion and seduction are often of this non-violent, ‘if you loved me, you would have sex with me’ type. Such narratives can 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 nor by blackmail, being more concerned to avoid post-sex worries over unsafe sex, and regret that he got ‘his way’. Driven by their own needs and desires and not for love or romance, these women, like some in Allen (2005b) and Formby, Hirst, and Shipton (2009), disrupt traditional constructions of female sexuality. Some young women in Maxwell and Aggleton (2012) also displayed their discursive power and agentic

potential through an ‘I decide’ approach to sex and relationships (310). The potential for female sexual subjectivity, agency and safety suggested by these data justifies SRE and political policy directives that endorse women’s rights to pleasure and the avoidance of anxiety, regret, coercion and danger.

Though there is not space to consider masturbation here, it is important to acknowledge its relevance to debates on pleasure and avoiding coercion. The essential point is that experiencing solo bodily pleasure can raise the bar on what is desired from sex with others. Hogarth and Ingham (2009) offer numerous examples. In simple terms, if we know what we enjoy, and will strive for, there is more chance of asking for what we want. This can contribute to avoiding or minimising 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, sexual abuse and violence. In turn, young people are more likely to seek 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’s sole sexual act of penis/vaginal penetration does not reflect the range of experiences 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 aged 15 ‘nearly sixteen’)

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, aged 16)

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. They explained their refrain from other types of sex as due to enjoying their current practices because they were pleasurable and safe. Abnormality, however, is implied (‘makes you think you’re maybe a bit weird’) by the ‘proper sex’ discourse. This, they argued, contributes to pressure to ‘go all the way’, that is, vaginal penetration. 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 to 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 can offer equal pleasure potential for women and men. It also challenges the primacy of vaginal penetration as the goal of ‘proper’ or ‘normal’ sex and avoids heteronormative content that depicts only straight couples. Rubin ([1984] 1999) refers to this normative tendency as the ‘charmed circle’ of good, normal, natural sexuality (153). In effect, it also perpetuates institutionalised homophobia, invisibilises and marginalises LGBTQ students and fails in

its equality duty (Department for Education 2010) to offer inclusive education and meaningful guidance on same sex identities and sexual practices.

Equality in relationships

A key theme running throughout this rationale is equality: SRE that promotes pleasure can also encourage relationships and sexual practices that are safer and more egalitarian (Beasley 2008). Despite considerable literature on heterosexual men's pleasure and the relationship to power, patriarchy and behaviours damaging to women, Beasley also notes that 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. Even so, evidence and theorising are needed on male heterosexual pleasure that deepen understanding of non-oppressive heterosexuality. Without more evidence and theorising, 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, exercising a clearer sense of agency and sexual subjectivity and working towards reciprocity in relationships.

Final remarks

This paper has offered sex educators a rationale on the importance of pleasure and positive SRE to improving sexual health, rights and equality. It has been argued that this is necessary because education that recognises pleasure for young people remains largely absent in many contexts (with some notable exceptions). In bringing together various authors' work and summarising key arguments that both problematise traditional models of sex education and offer a substantiated case for SRE that includes pleasure, the paper offers an original contribution to literature intended to support practitioners in making a succinct case on the merits of a sex-positive approach to those who are sceptical or oppose such developments. Debate on the adversarial nature of sex education provides the contextual background for the rationale. The grounds for the rationale centre on the significance of pleasure to developing sexual competence; discontinuing the emphasis on health and instead promoting pleasure in safer sex and HIV/STI and pregnancy prevention; challenging institutionalised heteropatriarchy and the silence on pleasure, particularly for young women; widening sexual repertoires that facilitate safer sex and challenge norms in traditional sex education; safeguarding by supporting the development of agency and resilience to coerced sexual practices and undermining discursive scripts; and finally the importance of promoting pleasure in SRE to encourage safer sexual practices and more egalitarian relationships. These do not represent all the reasons to promote positive SRE and pleasure. Others include critiquing mainstream pornography, preventing sexual dysfunction, and partnering SRE with accessible sexual health services.

Young women have been the focus of the paper because gender equality, positive sexual identities, practices and pleasure remain unattainable for some women/girls. Examples have been offered which illustrate sexual confidence and the agentic potential to expect more from sexual practices and relationships. Young men have received less attention but are acknowledged as equally important to achieving equality. More evidence and theorising on young men and pleasure are needed to support SRE programmes that address equality and mutual satisfaction in relationships.

Objections to the rationale and any subsequent implementation are foreseeable. A nuanced sense of the evidence is helpful and can be supported by Goldman's (2008) paper on responding to parental objections in school sexuality education. Also, learning from practitioners who have overcome resistance recommends working closely (from the outset) with senior management teams and retaining their support (Formby, Hirst, and Shipton 2009), partnership working with sexual health providers who can offer supportive evidence on the benefits of SRE linked to youth-friendly sexual health services (Vanwesenbeeck 2012), collaborating with governors, parents/carers and young people on plans for SRE, and ensuring input remains up to date and relevant by routinely evaluating experiences of SRE. For optimum impact, input best occurs in environments that are inclusive spaces, respect young people as sexual subjects and within climates of openness vis-à-vis sexuality, pleasure and relationships. A final cautionary note, having promoted pleasure throughout the paper, is to avoid creating a 'pleasure imperative' (Allen 2011, 101) that can impose an obligation or benchmark to judge the relative success (or not) of sexual experiences. Young people do not need any more pressures, yet we can catch a better glimpse of these pressures through open and honest conversations and by conducting more research, especially with young men.

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