*Sex Education; Sexuality, Society and Learning*

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This commentary reports on developments regarding Sex and Relationships Education[[1]](#footnote-1) (SRE, akin to Comprehensive Sex Education) in England and Wales over the past fifteen years or so. Many of the recommendations and processes that are included in this new briefing (BZgA et al., 2015) were certainly helpful in making such progress as was made, and we can also highlight issues that could profitably be covered in future updates.

An important boost to taking sexual health of young people seriously in Britain came from the development of the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). The then Prime Minister Tony Blair asked the Cabinet Office’s Social Exclusion Unit to investigate a number of areas which were felt to lead to exclusion from society; amongst these was early pregnancy and child-bearing. Much of the impetus for this came from the data which revealed that Britain had higher rates of teenage pregnancy than other western European countries, a statistic that Blair regarded as being ‘shameful’; he stated that ignoring the issue “ … can be seen all around us in shattered lives and blighted futures” (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999, preface).

The resulting Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (TPS) was based on detailed reviews of research, visits within the UK and abroad, and meetings with experts. Many of the 30 action points in the final report were directed towards halving the under 18 conception rate through media campaigns, provision of more accessible and youth friendly sexual health services, improved education about sex and relationships in schools and through support for parents and carers to discuss relevant issues in the home. Other targets were concerned with offering greater support for those young people who decided to continue with their pregnancy.

It is relevant to note that the major push for the TPS in the context of reducing early pregnancy. In other words, what was being suggested was a primarily pragmatic approach, as opposed to one based on an understanding of young people’s rights and entitlements, or one that was developed from a strong desire to put into practice the requirements of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, for example. This is not to imply that the intentions of Blair’s Government were in any way cynical or shallow, but merely to point out that there is a variety of routes into the arguments that surround the provision of SRE and that, consequently, any guidance produced needs to operate within a range of different discourses if it is to appeal to, persuade and support, different audiences.

The British approach was (and generally still is) in direct contrast to a dominant approach taken in the USA, which has a much stronger moral basis. The abstinence–only education (AOE) approach takes as its starting point the view that moral standards are central, and that delaying sex until (heterosexual) marriage is the one true way. Further, part of the argument in the purer forms of AOE is that informing young people about contraception at all (or at least not simply stressing its negative aspects) risks providing an easy means to avoid having to wait. The title of the compromise position – so-called ‘abstinence-plus’ programmes – provides a clear indication of its primary emphasis.

Even so, Blair could not resist a nod in the moral direction when he wrote in the preface to the SEU report “Let me make one point perfectly clear. I don’t believe young people should have sex before they are 16. I have strong views on this.” But he did nevertheless concede that those who ‘choose’ to do so need to get help to be adequately protected.

For the record, the under-18 conception rate has declined by almost 50 per cent since the launch of the strategy (Hadley et al., 2015), although it is difficult to ascertain precisely what has led to this decline or the relative contributions of increased sexual health service and contraception availability, improved SRE, increased educational performance, generally increased awareness of the issues involved (like gender issues, consent, sexual literacy, etc.) and other possible contributory factors. Those involved were delighted to read one of the UK’s leading political commentators describing the progress as ‘the success story of our time’ [[2]](#footnote-2).

As part of the implementation of the TPS, moves were made to ensure that SRE was a compulsory subject in schools that came under the state’s jurisdiction. Word from the field was that – no matter how strong the arguments and the need – little would change until there was increased legal and political backing. A large survey carried out by the UK Youth Parliament (UKYP, 2007) which was overwhelmingly in support of improved SRE was delivered to the Prime Minister’s residence in Downing Street with the full glare of publicity; this helped focus the then Government’s attention.

A working party was established under the Chair of Jim Knights, a Labour Member of Parliament, and containing representatives from youth organisations, faith groups, teachers, a researcher (me) and others. A clear recommendation for statutory SRE was made. After further scrutiny, the resulting Bill made its way into Parliament. Regrettably, a general election had been called meanwhile, which means that any Bills part way through the parliamentary process are dropped due to lack of time for debate, unless there is no opposition.

Not surprisingly, there was indeed opposition to this Bill, and a House of Lords debate produced the expected arguments. The rights of parents were pitted against the rights of young people, the potential loss of innocence was feared, and so on. One of the more telling (and depressing) interventions came from one Baroness O’Loan, who argued as follows

*There was a project in Glasgow, of which I am sure noble Lords are aware. What was described as an ideal programme of* [*PSHE*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PSHE) *was delivered. There was a follow-up across 25 schools, covering some, I think, 8,000 students, to see whether there was a reduced incidence of teenage pregnancy and abortion. The result was that there was not. (Hansard, May 2010)*

What the noble Lord was describing was one randomised control trial of one form of SRE (Henderson et al., 2007). To conclude that the results of this trial indicate that statutory SRE cannot be justified (as opposed to, for example, agreeing that it is needed but we need to work harder to find more effective programmes, modes of delivery, content, etc.) is, many would argue, a rather unusual display of logical deduction.

What it does do is to illustrate one of the enduring features of the debates around SRE; basically, is the starting position that it is necessary and desirable from a range of viewpoints and then explore how best to make it effective, or is the start position that it is not desired and/or is potentially harmful, and there is a need for purely pragmatic persuasion that the evidence trumps these forms of resistance? Different approaches and arguments are needed for these positions, and the various positions in between.

So, the efforts to get statutory status for SRE failed prior to the general election of 2010, and the matter went rather quiet during the ensuing coalition Government[[3]](#footnote-3) until 2014. The Education Select Committee[[4]](#footnote-4) instigated an enquiry into Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE) and SRE. Invitations were sent out to selected individuals to attend and give evidence, and a public call for submissions was issued. [[5]](#footnote-5)

Four public hearings were held with invited witnesses, and almost 500 written submissions were considered. Many of the submissions that opposed statutory PSHE/SRE contained one or more of the following: stressing the rights of parents to educate their children in such matters, drawing attention to some rather alarmist (and false) claims of what occurred in SRE lessons, assertions that education on such issues was a form of sexual abuse, questioning the motives of the proponents of SRE, and warning that they would withdraw their children from lessons should SRE be made compulsory. Many of the oppositional submissions started with a clear statement explaining their concern; for example [[6]](#footnote-6)

*I am a very concerned individual who wishes to protect the innocence of children.*

Other submissions – written and oral - covered a wide range of views.

For example, OFSTED[[7]](#footnote-7) reported that – despite examples of good practice in some schools – SRE was found to be inadequate in 40 per cent of schools (OFSTED, 2013, p7).[[8]](#footnote-8) The NATSAL[[9]](#footnote-9) team reported that the proportion of young people aged between 16 and 24 who reported that school was the main source of their SRE has increased over the past twenty years.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Unfortunately, it is not possible to ascertain the extent to which any of the MPs on the committee actually changed their minds as a result of the evidence presented and, if so, on what basis.

The final report of the Education Committee came out strongly in favour of statutory PSHE/SRE albeit maintaining the right of withdrawal by parents. To date, the new Conservative Government[[11]](#footnote-11) has not felt able to implement this recommendation, a response[[12]](#footnote-12) that was described by the new (Conservative) chair of the Education Committee as being ‘disappointing’ and ‘feeble’ [[13]](#footnote-13).

The Ministerial response does acknowledge the importance of PSHE and SRE but places greater emphasis on the need for local determination of priorities and approaches. This is not only part of a move away from central direction for education in general, but also avoids the risk of upsetting the more extreme faith schools and religious parents. However, by leaving decisions to local school governors, teachers and parents the current patchy and inconsistent provision is likely to continue since there remain many personal fears and concerns, partly fuelled by a sensationalist media.

So, there is much work still to be done; the policy brief will undoubtedly feed into the continued discussions and advocacy activities at national and local levels, and hopefully be helpful in countering some of the barriers that are, and will be, encountered. For the future, and based on my experiences and observations as having been closely involved in the various activities described[[14]](#footnote-14), I want to mention briefly some specific issues that have been controversial alongside the more high-level general and ideological discussions.

Central amongst these is the need to understand better the blocking of progress due to the perpetuation of myths and misunderstandings, and deal with these head on – although it needs to be borne in mind that some objectors with strong ideological positions are highly unlikely to be swayed by any form of evidence. A fine example of this myth-busting approach is provided by Goldman’s (2008) paper on Australian parents’ objections to SRE.

Examples of further specific issues that could be featured in future policy briefs include

* whether and under what conditions parents/ carers should have the right to withdraw their children from statutory SRE classes;
* at what ages should different types of SRE begin;
* how teachers and/or outside visitors can be best supported to deliver SRE;
* how parents can best be involved in supporting good SRE, and vice versa;
* how best can we take account of what young people themselves feel and need;
* whether SRE should be located within broader health and social education;
* how modern challenges – such as online pornography and social media – are best dealt with in schools;
* the ways in which good SRE can feed into the preventing sexual abuse by increasing children and young people’s awareness, and making it easier to report;
* how issues related to consent can best be covered; and
* how we might best overcome the fairly common objections to the use of the correct names for the genitals.

Finally, within sex education, pleasure, including masturbation, often gets ignored (Hogarth and Ingham, 2009; Ingham, 2005, 2013). Critics fear that pointing out to young people that sex can be an enjoyable experience will encourage them to get started earlier. On the contrary, the experiences of Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands, who adopt earlier and more open and honest approaches to these matters, show little difference in early activity but vastly superior physical and psychological sexual health outcomes (Weaver et al., 2007).

Overall, however, the European Group has put together a comprehensive and tightly packed set of arguments, and different sections will appeal in different ways to people and countries at different positions on the journey. Here in England and Wales we look forward to further editions that will feed into the continuing efforts to change the culture around sex and relationships education for young people.

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1. There is ongoing discussion about whether this should say ‘relationship’ or relationships’. Some say that the former is preferred since people should only have one in their lifetimes; others disagree for a variety of reasons. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/13/drop-teenage-pregnancies-success-story-children [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Due to no overall majority being obtained in the 2010 general election, a coalition Government was formed between the Conservatives and the more centrist Liberal Democrats [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. one of a series of all-party bodies whose task is to scrutinise the work of the various departments of government [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See all evidence and the final report on http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/education-committee/inquiries/parliament-2010/pshe-and-sre-in-schools-inquiry/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Written evidence to Education Committee from Philip Taylor, SRE0028 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Written evidence to the Education Committee from OFSTED, SRE0443 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Written evidence to Education Committee from the NATSAL team, SRE0472 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. A fairly right wing party [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\_data/file/446038/50742\_Cm\_9121\_Web.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/education-committee/news-parliament-2015/comment-sex-education-15-16/ [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. as the research member of the Independent Advisory Group for the TPS, as a panel member of the Knight enquiry into SRE, as a witness for the Education Committee enquiry, and through many visits across the UK and abroad to talk about the issues involved [↑](#footnote-ref-14)