

Beyond the birds and the bees: constituting a discourse of erotics in sexuality education

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A tradition of predominately feminist literature has revealed that there is a 'missing discourse of desire' in many sex education programmes. Building on this work, this article explores the gendered effects of this de-eroticized and clinical form of education. It is argued that young women and men's (hetero)sexual subjectivities are differentially affected by the invisibility of desire and pleasure in this curriculum. To offer young women a sense of personal empowerment and entitlement, and young men a broader range of (hetero)sexual subjectivities, it is proposed that sex education include a discourse of erotics. This would comprise more than an acknowledgement of desire and pleasure and incorporate the embodied practicalities of these experiences. As a means of developing this discourse within sexuality programmes, empirical evidence of 17- to 19-year-olds' experiences of desire and pleasure are examined.

Introduction

There are few sex education programmes which embrace the idea that positive experiences of sexual desire and pleasure are integral to young people's sexual health and well-being. More generally, as Aggleton (2000) notes, sex education equates young people's sexual health with the absence of sexually transmitted infections and the avoidance of unintended pregnancies. This observation is supported by a tradition of feminist research that identifies the way in which much sex education denies that young people are sexual subjects (Jackson, 1978; Wolpe, 1987; Lenskyj, 1990; Lees, 1994). Fine's work has made an important contribution here in documenting a 'missing discourse of desire', that positively acknowledges and incorporates young women's sexual desire within sex education (Fine, 1988). While it has been established that positive and empowering discourses of desire and pleasure are 'missing' from sex education, arguments about why their inclusion is important are less well articulated (Gagnon & Simon, 1973). Subsequently, this article explores the benefits of including these discourses within sexuality education for young women and men's sexual health and well-being¹.

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In arguing for a positive and empowering incorporation of desire and pleasure in sexuality education, this article moves beyond the concept of 'a missing discourse of desire' to propose the need for a discourse of erotics within these programmes. A discourse of erotics would involve the acknowledgement that all young people, whatever their gender and sexual identity (transgender, intersex, female, male, lesbian, gay, bisexual, heterosexual or something else), are sexual subjects who have a right to experience sexual pleasure and desire. Including this discourse within programmes is about creating spaces in which young people's sexual desire and pleasure can be legitimated, positively integrated and deemed common place. The presence of such a discourse would also involve a right to knowledge about the body as related to sexual response and pleasure and may include the logistics of bodily engagement in sexual activity. This information is vital not only for practicing safer sex (for example, which pleasurable activities are high/low risk for sexually transmissible infections), but also in terms of enhancing interpersonal relationships. If the aim of sexuality education is sexual health and well-being, then introducing a discourse of erotics does not mean discarding messages about preventing unwanted outcomes of sexual activity. As I have argued elsewhere (Allen, 2001) it could mean reformulating these messages in ways which acknowledge and affirm young people as sexual subjects who can experience sexual desire and pleasure.

This article does not detail the finer points of how a discourse of erotics might be worked into sexuality curricula. How this might occur is largely dependent on contextual factors such as policy governing the teaching of sexuality, teacher training and class composition (age, ethnicity, etc). Discourses are 'an interrelated 'system of statements which cohere around common meanings and values [that] are a product of social factors, of power and practices, rather than an individual's set of ideas' (Hollway, cited in Gavey, 1992, p. 327). Their social complexity and production within a particular historical moment and geographical space mean that what constitutes a discourse of erotics will vary across programmes. Instead, this article highlights some potential benefits of opening up discursive space within our communications with young people about sexual pleasure and desire. This does not mean that young people have to, or will necessarily seize upon these spaces, but that they are no longer denied them because they are 'missing' from some sex education programmes.

After establishing why a discourse of erotics in sexuality education maybe advantageous to young people, this article begins the process of constituting such a discourse by drawing on empirical research with 17- to 19-year-olds. This work documents the experiences and conceptualizations of desire and pleasure specific to a group of young New Zealanders and may or may not be the kind of information included in a curriculum which comprised a discourse of erotics. The aim of presenting these findings is to constitute young people as sexual subjects with the capacity for, and right to, positive experiences of sexual desire and pleasure. It is also a means of drawing upon the knowledge and resources of young people themselves, so that this discourse is constituted through their own experiences of 'erotics'. By using this contextual information as a starting point, this discourse is more likely to tap into what is relevant and interesting for young people.

Findings are derived from a larger study involving 515 self identified (hetero)sexuals² which explored the relationships between young people's sexual knowledge, subjectivities and practices. This investigation was framed by an interest in understanding what is conceptualized as a 'gap' between what young people learn in sexuality education and what occurs in practice. Diverse exploratory methods were used to collect data about desire and pleasure ranging from individual and couple interviews³ to questionnaires⁴, focus groups⁵ and 'Pleasure Sheets'. These sheets asked subjects who were sexually active at the time of the research, to indicate what sexual practices they found pleasurable and why. The purpose of a multiple method approach was to provide research contexts that could generate different types of narratives about (hetero)sexualities. While data from the interviews and focus groups have been explored in detail elsewhere (Allen, 2002, 2002a, 2003) material from the 'Pleasure Sheets' and questionnaire relating to a discourse of erotics is focused on here.

A diversity of narratives was sought through the sample composition which consisted of various ethnic groups and youth at school or in job training programmes in the community⁶. As all participants were volunteers the research findings cannot be generalized to the wider youth population. They are instead weighted towards those who were at school, Pakeha⁷, young women and (hetero)sexual. With these limitations in mind this work can only make a small contribution to the constitution of a discourse of erotics. It can not for example offer what should be integral to any discourse of erotics and that is conceptualizations of pleasure and desire from gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender⁸, takataapui⁹ and intersex¹⁰ youth. It is hoped however, that it will open spaces for others to enter this conversation to build and integrate this discourse for positive effect within sexuality education.

Given the (hetero)sexual exclusivity of the research sample and the importance of incorporating sexual diversity within any discourse of erotics, this constraint warrants special mention. It can be said that while the desires of young (hetero)sexuals, especially young women, have been missing from sexuality education, any acknowledgement of the mere existence of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) identities are a gaping omission in many programmes. In those instances when homosexuality does surface, it is often associated with gay men and the dangers of contracting HIV. Burgeoning empirical evidence indicates that sex education has traditionally ignored young LGBTI's needs for knowledge and affirmation of their sexual identities, to considerable detriment for some (Epstein, 1994; Quinlivan, 1996; Vincent & Ballard, 1997; Hillier *et al.*, 1998). In order that a discourse of erotics does not contribute to heteronormalizing techniques that render heterosexuality as 'normal' and 'homosexuality' as 'deviance', it will need to tap into young LGBTI's experiences of desire and pleasure. Work in this area is already being undertaken by Ussher and Mooney Somers (2000), who have examined young lesbian women's negotiation and interpretation of initial experiences of sexual desire.

To establish the context for a discussion about the benefits of including a discourse of erotics within sexuality education, the following section briefly outlines how the embodiment of desire and pleasure have been 'missing' from programmes.

‘The birds and the bees’: de-eroticized sex education

Much has been written about the purpose(s) of sex education and how at any historical moment these are mediated by public discourses that constitute social and economic phenomena as ‘problems’ to be addressed (Diorio, 1985; Reiss, 1993). This has meant that since its inception in the Western world, sex education has been variously perceived as a tool for curbing rising rates of sexually transmitted infections, ‘promiscuity’, ‘sexual deviance’ and or the ‘negative’ effects of unintended pregnancy (Thomson, 1994; Thorogood, 2000). As a result of this concentration on curtailing various ‘social problems’, the positive exploration of desire and pleasure as part of sexuality has often been ignored or sidelined. In fact, the pursuit of desire and pleasure outside of marriage has generally been perceived as a core factor contributing to these problems. Subsequently, sex education’s messages have often sought to quell sexual desire and underplay sexual pleasure in an endeavour to discourage seemingly inappropriate quests for either.

Attention to sexual desire and pleasure have been diverted in sexuality education through the constitution of sexual intercourse as synonymous with reproduction (Thorogood, 2000). In this way (hetero)sexual intercourse is legitimated by the procurement of children rather than the quenching of desires (Diorio & Munro, 2000; Scholer, 2002). In learning about ‘how sperm fertilizes egg’ the potential reproductive effects of intercourse are given precedence over the embodied sensual experiences of those engaging in this activity (Gilbert, 1996). By failing to mention the possible pleasurable corporeal effects of sexual intercourse, the only inducement to engage in this activity is the production of children. A further consequence of equating sexual activity with reproduction is a construction of sexuality that is fundamentally (hetero)sexual and ultimately defined in terms of men’s penetration of women. As Thorogood explains:

Sex education in this model, therefore, becomes concerned with contraception, and by implication hetero-sex, fertile sex and childbearing. This of course marginalizes all other forms of sexuality and defines them as against the ‘norm’ of monogamous, heterosexual, married fertile and penetrative sex. (Thorogood, 2000, p. 433)

Another means by which positive explorations of desire and pleasure have been precluded from sex education is the way involvement in sexual activity is constituted as ‘dangerous’. This connection is created through prioritizing the potential negative consequences of sexual activity over the positive. For example, by concentrating on the acquisition of sexually transmissible infections, or the threat of physical violence and abuse and not mentioning the corporeal and emotional pleasures of sexual activity. An often cited example here are the images of genitalia covered in angry pustules to which many students in sexuality education have been exposed (Gilbert, 1996). These have served to impress upon young people the potential risks of engaging in sexual activity and ultimately to frighten them out of this behaviour. Treating sexuality as exclusively a ‘risky business’ has not only fostered a missing discourse of erotics in sexuality education but communicated a one sided view which omits the possible pleasurable benefits of such activity.

A final example of how a discourse of erotics has been missing from much sexuality education is the way some students have been taught about the (sexual) body. Rather than being portrayed as a pleasurable element of subjectivity which is sense bestowing and responsive, bodies are often represented as desexualized and desensitized. Evidence of this is seen in the medicalized images of genitalia, purposefully labeled 'Reproductive Organs' with which students are presented. Instead of pictures of actual bodies, images are often diagrammatic with emphasis placed on an internal view of organs as if the body had been dissected. This concentration on internal organs rather than the more sexualized external contours of bodies, serves to draw our attention away from its sensuality and place it firmly on its (reproductive) function. Similarly, bodies are constructed as desensitized in that their capacity for desire and pleasure is often ignored, so that the penis is rarely shown as erect and the clitoris sometimes left unlabelled. The definitive effect of these representations is to de-eroticize the body and disassociate it from embodied feelings of desire and pleasure.

Benefits of including a discourse of erotics in sexuality education

Having explored some of the ways a discourse of erotics has been rendered missing from sexuality education, this section is concerned with the power effects of these programmes. Power can be seen to operate in the way sexuality education serves as a 'disciplinary technique' for the production of particular subjected and practiced bodies (Foucault, 1980). According to Foucault (1981) this occurs because sexuality has been 'deployed' as a domain of regulation and social control and sexuality education is one of the many sites in which this regulation is discursively produced. Referring to how the disciplinary power of sexuality education is exercised Wagener explains that:

Particularly since the early decades of the twentieth century, curriculum technologies, such as those that clearly define, categorize, examine, evaluate, distinguish, and standardize appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, have enabled pedagogical practices, including those found in sexuality education, to participate in the multiple ways in which lives of school students are governed. (Wagener, 1998, p. 145)

In the Foucauldian sense, this regulation of subjects is possible because of power's essentially positive nature and ability to produce certain behaviours, attitudes and desires from them. In the context of sexuality education this means that the institutionally sanctioned power of discourses contained within these programmes engender a micro-management of subject's sexual practices. This effect of power is gendered in that dominant discourses within sexuality education produce different subject positions for young women and men to take up. In terms of a missing discourse of erotics then, there are varying consequences for young women and men's sexual subjectivities and ultimately their experience of sexual well-being.

The silence around a discourse of erotics within sexuality education has particular ramifications for young women. This is because access to such discourses are generally more difficult for them, as they are already socially constituted as possessing lower levels of sexual desire and being able to experience sexual pleasure less

easily than young men (Allen, 2003). This means that young women are often cast as the passive recipients of active male desires, a subject position sexuality education (re)produces through the absence of a discourse of erotics. Without exploring the possible benefits of sexual activity in terms of pleasurable sensation, sexuality education fails to provide young women with a standard against which to make decisions about engaging (or not) in this activity (Bollerund, 1990; Warr, 2001). In fact, it suggests that sexual activity will not be pleasurable for them and subsequently denies them a subject position from which they might make an active choice. Without acknowledging young women as sexually desiring subjects and revealing the possibility sexual activity might have pleasurable, corporeal outcomes, sexuality education fails to convey a sense of personal empowerment and entitlement for young women. As others have noted (Holland *et al.*, 1991; Lees, 1993; Stewart, 1999), this has important repercussions for young women's sense of being able to initiate safer sex in relationships.

Not only does the absence of a discourse of erotics mean that young women are discursively constituted as passive, but the possibility that they might experience sexual activity as corporeally pleasurable is also eroded. If there is no acknowledgement that young women's bodies can have strong pleasurable physiological responses during sexual activity and that these are 'normal' and positive outcomes, then the possibility of this being their experience may be reduced. This might be explained by the way that discursive constructions can be seen to have 'real effects' because in post-structural terms, language constitutes meaning and possibilities for practice (Weedon, 1987). So for instance, it is not that women's bodies are in some way essentially less easily pleased than young men's, but that language constitutes our experience of them as such. The reality of this is seen in numerous studies which document young women's dissatisfaction and disillusionment with (hetero)sexual practices (Thompson 1990; Thomson & Scott, 1991; Hillier *et al.*, 1999). Given that the experience of sexual pleasure can have physical and mental health benefits, any omission to convey this to young women may potentially have negative effects for their sexual well-being.

It might be argued that young men's (hetero)sexual desire and pleasure are given more space in some sexuality education programmes. This occurs in the form of information about 'wet dreams' and 'erections' which are often framed in a heteronormative discourse of 'growing up' and becoming interested in 'the opposite sex'. However such discourses around 'awakening male sexuality' also have a regulatory effect in their prescriptions of 'normal' and 'expected' (hetero)sexuality. Allusions to male (hetero)sexual desire in the absence of equivalent references for young women, constitute young men's sexuality as predatory. This offers a standard against which young men might measure their sexuality as appropriately masculine and discover themselves 'sub-standard' if their experiences do not conform. Thus while sexuality education is more likely to provide a discourse of (hetero)sexual desire for young men, it offers them limited ways of being masculine sexual subjects. So that young men may be able to express their sexuality in a broader range of ways (including homosexual desire), it is necessary that any discourse of erotics enables them to move beyond the constraints of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995).

There is another argument for why the inclusion of a discourse of erotics is important for young men. The larger project from which this article is derived collected data about young people's sources of sexual knowledge. These findings revealed that almost three quarters of young men in the sample had consulted pornographic magazines and rated this information 'very useful.'¹¹ It might be seen that in the absence of a discourse of erotics in sexuality education many young men may seek such information in other contexts and find it most overtly available within pornography. Anti-pornography feminists have written prolifically about the effects of pornography and the way it can be seen to exploit and objectify women (see Coward, 1987, p. 307). Mainstream pornography is a key way by which hegemonic male sexual subjectivities are constituted and this construction is deleterious for sexual equality. As Jackson and Scott have argued, pornography:

... helps to circulate and perpetuate particular versions of these narratives such as the mythology of women as sexually available, deriving pleasure from being dominated and possessed and a model of masculinity validated through sexual mastery over women. A man does not rape as a direct reaction to a pornographic stimulus; rather pornography contributes to the cultural construction of a particular form of masculinity and sexual desire which make rape possible (Jackson & Scott, 1996, p. 23).

Pornography as a source of information about (hetero)sexual desire and pleasure arguably can reproduce oppressive male sexual subjectivities that sustain inequitable sexual politics (Dworkin, 1981). By neglecting to include a discourse of erotics that incorporates (hetero)sexual desire and pleasure in a positive, empowering and gender equitable manner, sexuality education offers no alternative discourses with which to contest mainstream pornography. Without these, most young (hetero)sexual men will only have access to discourses of pornography that not only limit their own experience of sexual desire and pleasure, but those of their partners also.

The current study also indicates that including a discourse of erotics may have other positive effects for both genders. For sexuality education that fails to meet the needs and interests of young people, the inclusion of such a discourse may bring these programmes closer to young people's own concerns. While this argument has been explored in detail elsewhere (Allen, 2001) it is briefly reiterated here. I have argued that the concept of a 'gap' between knowledge gleaned from sexuality education and young people's actual sexual practices does not acknowledge young people's own conceptualizations of their sexual knowledge. The 'logic' underlying the conceptualization of this 'gap' is that what is learned in sexuality education is deemed necessary for sexual practice, a notion which many young people in my research did not share. What these young women and men's narratives indicated, was that to them being sexually knowledgeable meant being knowledgeable about a discourse of erotics. While 'erotics' means 'of, concerning, or arousing sexual desire or giving sexual pleasure' (Sinclair, 1995) for subjects in this sample it also comprised details about how to instigate or manage interaction that involved or might lead to sexual activity. For example, how to ask someone on a date or how to physically engage in sexual activity. This kind of knowledge was given precedence over more 'official' discourses about for example, safer sex and was identified by

young people in the research as missing from sexuality education. Including a discourse of erotics in sexuality education would not only acknowledge these young people's own conceptualizations of sexual knowledge, but bring its teachings closer to their own interests and concerns.

First steps: building a discourse of erotics around young people

As outlined earlier, what follows makes a limited contribution to laying the empirical foundations for a discourse of erotics within sexuality education. It is offered alongside other evolving work from feminists, masculinities and queer theorists who have sought to explore young women's and men's sexual subjectivities and practices (Quinlivan, 1996; Hillier *et al.*, 1998; Stewart, 1999; Holland *et al.*, 1994; Tolman, 1994; Wight, 1996). While I have traversed young (hetero)sexual women's and men's embodied experiences of desire and pleasure elsewhere, here I concentrate on those practices seen to elicit this pleasure and what it is about them which produces this.

Documenting such practices is a political act aimed at recognizing young people as sexual subjects. In doing this it is acknowledged that seeking and expressing desire and pleasure can be a legitimate aspect of young people's sexual health. This objective supports the assertion by the Pan American Health Organization and World Association for Sexology that 'erotic pleasure is a positive, rewarding, health promoting and basic human need' (Pan American Health Organization & World Health Organization, 2000, p. 25). Collecting such data also endeavours to answer recommendations for the promotion of sexual health made by these organizations. These include calls for the:

- Need for knowledge about the body, as related to sexual response and pleasure.
- Need of recognition of the value of sexual pleasure enjoyed through out life in safe and responsible manners within a values framework respectful of the rights of others.
- Need to foster the practice and enjoyment of consensual, non-exploitative, honest, mutually pleasurable sexual relationships.

In presenting these data my intention is not to provide a prescription of what 17- to 19-year-olds should or could find pleasurable and desirable about sexual activity. Because all discourses have regulatory effects, a discourse of erotics would need to be integrated into programmes so as not to cast sexual desire and pleasure as normative and imply their absence signifies deficiency. Rather than producing its meanings as mandatory, the effect of incorporating such a discourse is to make young people's access to it possible and legitimate within school environments, so they might gain in the ways outlined above. It would therefore include the right of young people to not want to experience desire and pleasure.

The following data provides insights into a group of 17- to 19-year-olds experiences of sexual pleasure and desire. These findings are not representative of the

youth population as a whole or of young (hetero)sexuals generally, but instead are bound by these individual's experience of what is pleasurable and desired. In many ways these practices/feelings are constituted through dominant discourses about appropriately gendered pleasures/desires, and therefore do not encompass all the possible sexual pleasures young people might experience. In terms of constituting a discourse of erotics, it is not so much the specifics of sexual practice that is useful here, but the fact that such data reveals young people as sexual subjects.

Data on what might be constituted as a discourse of 'erotics' could be found in the 'Pleasure Sheet' completed by six couples who participated in the couple interviews. While one partner was with me during an individual interview, the other filled out a sheet naming particular sexual activities they had engaged in during their present and previous relationships and whether or not they had found these pleasurable. The activities ranged from hugging/kissing, mutual masturbation, to anal sex and sharing sexual fantasies. Space was also provided for subjects to indicate any activities not specified (however only one subject utilized this). From these sheets the most common sexual activities engaged in were hugging, kissing, sexual intercourse, oral sex, mutual masturbation, sexual touching and sharing sexual fantasies. Although not referred to by other subjects, one young woman who had been in her relationship for 9.5 months added that she also enjoyed 'talking dirty'. The least practiced activity was 'anal sex' with only one young woman having engaged in this during a previous relationship. This echoes findings from an Australian study of 18 to 19-year-olds, where only 5% of (hetero)sexual couples reported this practice (Roddan *et al.*, 1996). Most of the activities were found to be pleasurable by all subjects, although two young men indicated that they did not find giving a partner oral sex so.

Information which might constitute a discourse of erotics could also be found in response to questions posed in an anonymous written questionnaire. In order to establish whether young people found sexual activity pleasurable or not, subjects were asked to 'agree' or 'disagree' with the statement that 'sexual activity is pleasurable'. This statement was one of 15 items aimed at determining young people's attitudes towards sexual activity. In an attempt to disrupt the conflation of sexual activity with sexual intercourse, subjects were provided with the explanation that 'sexually active means engaging in petting and/or sexual intercourse with a partner'. Of those who responded to this question 92% of young women and 94% of young men agreed that sexual activity was pleasurable. This indicates a resounding majority of young people in this study had lived experience of, (or if they were not sexually active thought that this activity could be) pleasurable.

Another open ended question was designed to determine what young people found pleasurable about sexual activity and asked subjects to complete the sentence, 'What I find pleasurable about sexual activity is ...'. Only those who described themselves as having been sexually active with a partner answered this question. In accordance with the definition of 'sexual activity' above, 89% of subjects categorized themselves as sexually active. Answers revealed an interesting array of corporeal and

emotional pleasures derived from (hetero)sexual activity which could be coded into a series of themes displayed in the table below.

The most consistently mentioned answers could be coded under the general heading 'pleasure and enjoyment' and made reference to a sense of this activity being simply 'fun' and 'enjoyable' or as one young man described it 'exhilarating' (sic). The following is a sample of answers representative of those provided by subjects for this question. Original grammar and spelling has been preserved.

Enjoying being with my partner. (Female, At School, 17 years)

I love the fun of it. Very exciting. (Male, Not at School, 17 years)

That I can have fun and do what I want to do in a fun manor. (Female, At School, 17 years)

You get enjoyment from both sides. (Female, At School, 17 years)

The level of enjoyment I get from it. (Male, At School, 18 years)

As this question was posed within the context of an anonymous questionnaire there was not an opportunity to define exactly what subjects found 'fun' and 'exciting' about this activity. However other answers to this question discussed below give some additional insights here. There were no significant differences between young women and men's answers to this question, suggesting that the fact this activity could be fun and enjoyable was an equally relevant pleasure for both.

The feeling of 'togetherness and closeness' sexual activity can generate was another popular specification for both genders. This 'togetherness' was expressed in terms of the way physical proximity incited a pleasurable mix of corporeal and

Table 1. What I find pleasurable about sexual activity is ...

| What young people find pleasurable about sexual activity | % Young women *() = N | % Young men *() = N | Total *() = N |
|--|---------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Activities other than sex | (24) 12.4 | (16) 17.0 | (40) 13.9 |
| Desiring someone | (2) 1.0 | (2) 4.2 | (4) 1.3 |
| Being desired | (16) 8.2 | (4) 4.3 | (20) 6.9 |
| Being in control | (5) 2.6 | (3) 3.2 | (8) 2.8 |
| Positive feelings associated with body | (41) 21.1 | (27) 28.7 | (68) 23.6 |
| Learning/experimentation | (10) 5.2 | (2) 2.1 | (12) 4.2 |
| This activity being mutual | (20) 10.3 | (0) .0 | (20) 6.9 |
| Experience of pleasure/enjoyment | (70) 36.1 | (41) 43.6 | (111) 38.5 |
| Pleasurableness of emotional intimacy | (13) 6.7 | (13) 13.8 | (26) 9.0 |
| Relief/relaxation | (4) 2.1 | (2) 2.1 | (6) 2.1 |
| Togetherness/closeness | (67) 34.5 | (18) 19.1 | (85) 29.5 |
| Touching someone else | (11) 5.7 | (4) 4.3 | (15) 5.2 |
| Way of increasing emotional intimacy | (20) 10.3 | (4) 4.3 | (24) 8.3 |

Pertains to the number of mentions young people made of these themes. One answer could potentially contain more than one theme.

N = 336, Female = 214, Male = 122

emotional sensation. These statements were differentiated from others that could be categorized under the theme 'pleasurableness of emotional intimacy' in that they made specific reference to the way physical closeness increased emotional bonds. This can be seen in the statements below where being physically close to a partner evokes pleasurable emotional feelings.

Feeling you get when you are close to them. (Male, At School, 17 years)

Being close to someone I love. (Female, Not at School, 18 years)

The feeling of being so close to someone. (Male, At School, 17 years)

The feeling of closeness and affection between two people. (Female, Not at School, 18 years)

The intimacy and the feeling and the bond afterwards. (Female, Not at School, 19 years)

There was a significant gender difference in responses here however, with more young women than young men reporting this (sig. 007). These responses generally drew upon dominant discourses of (hetero)sexuality where young women are constituted as having greater investment in the emotional benefits of relationships, while young men are perceived to be more concerned with its corporeal benefits (Duncombe & Marsden, 1993). Holland *et al's* research has revealed how sexuality is a central site in men's struggles to become successfully masculine and this involves a disengagement with so called feminine concern with emotion (Holland *et al.*, 1993). The expression of young women's sexuality by contrast is regulated by their need to manage their sexual reputations (Holland *et al.*, 1991; Thomson & Scott, 1991; Lees, 1993). Displaying too much interest in the physical pleasures of relationships (without emotional investment) puts young women in danger of being a 'slut' and gaining a negative sexual reputation. Given these disciplinary features regulating young women and men's (hetero)sexualities, it may not be surprising that more young women than men wrote about 'togetherness and closeness' being a pleasure gleaned from sexual activity.

Answers which indicated what young people rated as the third most pleasurable thing about sexual activity were coded under the heading 'positive feelings associated with the body'. These expressions of pleasure were grounded in bodily sensations which produced a positive and enjoyable corporeal experience. This acknowledgement of pleasurable corporeal feeling was evident in the following statements.

The feeling of having my partner inside my body. (Female, At School, 17 years)

The closeness involved and the feeling of naked skin together. (Female, Not at School, 19 years)

The feeling of the penis going in and out of me and him touching me all over and feeling me. (Female, Not at School, 17 years)

My partner's body against mine. (Male, Not at School, 18 years)

Feeling, kissing, staring, hugging. (Male, Not at School, 17 years)

Slow touching, and getting hot/sweaty. (Male, At School, 18 years)

The differences between the number of young women and men who named positive feelings associated with the body as pleasurable were not significant. However, as the table above indicates when these themes were ranked by gender, young men named 'positive feelings associated with the body' as the second most pleasurable aspect of sexual activity, while for young women this came third after 'togetherness and closeness'. While positive emotional benefits featured in young people's answers to this question (as seen in the themes of 'increasing emotional intimacy' and 'pleasurableness of emotional intimacy') on their own these did not rate as highly as pleasures of the 'flesh'. I think that some caution might be exercised in reading these results as young people finding the physical benefits of sexual activity more pleasurable than their emotional advantages. In responses to this question, it was difficult to distinguish whether subjects were referring to the emotional or physical pleasures of sexual activity, because in many of their answers these seemed inextricably entwined. This is clearly seen in the first two themes of 'pleasure and enjoyment' and 'togetherness/closeness', which may be indeterminately derived from physical/emotional sources.

One particularly interesting result is that a significant gender difference was found in answers which described 'emotional intimacy' as being a pleasurable aspect of sexual activity. In a manner that appears to disrupt dominant (hetero)sexual subjectivities, more young men than young women indicated they found this pleasurable. This finding might be explained by the fact that the sample was comprised of volunteers and as is common in sexuality research fewer young men offered to participate (Ehrhardt, 1997). Lower numbers of male volunteers might be attributed to the fact that discussing sexuality in a research context is not appropriately masculine and therefore participation is less appealing for young men. This means that those young men who do volunteer may be more flexible in revealing what they find pleasurable about sexual activity when this does not conform to dominant discourses of male (hetero)sexuality.

There are very few studies which have documented young people's experience of sexual desire especially within the New Zealand context (Tolman, 1994). This study sought to determine if young people perceived themselves as desiring subjects and to what extent. In something akin to a question from a 'sex survey' in a magazine, subjects were asked 'How would you describe your sexual desire?' The options provided were 'Very strong', 'Average', 'Weak' and 'None'. The majority of subjects (57%) described their sexual desire as average, with more subjects likely to say their sexual desire was 'strong' rather than 'weak'. While more young men said their sexual desire was 'very strong', young women were more likely to say their sexual desire was 'weak' however, these differences were not significant. These results sit somewhat uncomfortably with discourses that emerged at the turn of the century constituting 'adolescence' as a time of turmoil fuelled by raging hormones and uncontrollable urges (Aggleton & Campbell, 2000). In fact young people in this study rated their sexual desire as neither 'rampant' nor 'weak' but instead 'average'. This may imply (and other New Zealand research would suggest) that strong desire is not always the reason for their engagement in sexual activity (Dickson *et al.*, 1998).

Exploring how young people expressed their desires was the focus of another survey question. The intention here was to disclose how sexual desires were given expression in a relationship with a well known partner. In response to, 'How would you express your sexual desires to a partner you knew well' subjects could tick one of the following options:

- (a) By telling them.
- (b) By showing them what I like and want.
- (c) By telling and showing them what I like.
- (d) I don't express my sexual desires to my partner.

The majority of subjects indicated they would both 'tell and show' their desires to a partner with the next preferred method being to simply 'tell them'. A significant gender difference was found here with more young women indicating they would do this. The fact that young women would take an additional step and physically act on their desire, by showing a partner what they liked, is an interesting contravention of dominant notions of female sexual passivity. As Kenway reveals, young women's sexual subjectivities are the result of a mutable set of resistances and accommodations which depend upon contextual factors and access to power (Kenway, 1997, p. 65). That showing someone what they liked is less likely to be an option that young men adopt may be a result of increasing education around sexual harassment and prohibitions around 'touch', especially men touching women (Jones, 2001). The influence of these messages might also be seen in the fact that significantly more young men than women disclosed that they 'do not express their desires to their partners.

Closing thoughts

The central aim of this paper has been to outline the benefits of including a discourse of erotics within sexuality education and imply how these might be gendered. In support of these arguments another objective has been to provide some empirical foundations for the creation of such a discourse in sexuality education.

Previous research has revealed how desire and pleasure have been missing from sexuality education and this article has sought to discuss and build on these findings. It has done this by exploring what gendered consequences this has for young people's sexual well-being. I have argued that by not acknowledging and positively incorporating young women's desires and pleasures into sexuality education, there maybe a failure to communicate a sense of personal empowerment and sexual entitlement to them. For young men, the lack of a positive reconfiguration of desire and pleasure in sexuality programmes, suggests that their sexual experiences are confined by expressions of hegemonic male (hetero)sexuality. Given that dominant subject positions of male (hetero)sexuality 'require young men to exercise power over women', such discourses not only limit any alternative expression of male sexualities (including homosexuality) but are also disempowering for their partners.

A further argument in support of including a discourse of erotics within sexuality education is that it provides a means of contesting competing discourses of 'erotica' within mainstream pornography. Such pornography offers denigrating portrayals of women as the objects of male desire rather than the subjects of their own. It is therefore important that young people have easy access to more positive and equitable erotic discourses of (hetero)sexuality. Similarly, there is evidence to suggest that including such a discourse would not only acknowledge young people's own conceptualization of sexual knowledge, but bring sexuality education's messages in closer alignment with their interests and concerns.

On the basis of these arguments it is believed that the inclusion of a discourse of erotics within sexuality education could contribute to the sexual health and well-being of young people, especially those who choose to engage in sexual activity in relationships.

Notes

1. Since the inception of the *Health and physical education curriculum* (1999) in New Zealand 'sex education' has officially undergone a name change to 'sexuality education'. It is stated in this curriculum that 'sex education, generally refers only to the physical dimension of sexuality education' while 'sexuality education' is believed to be a more holistic and inclusive term which covers all aspects of sexuality (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 38).
2. 'Hetero' is bracketed in an attempt to decentre the notion of (hetero)sexual experience as the 'norm'.
3. Six couple interviews were conducted with young people who were in a relationship at the time of the research. These were directly followed by individual interviews with each partner.
4. 411 questionnaires were completed asking young people about their sexual subjectivities, knowledge and practices.
5. 17 Focus groups were conducted by the researcher in both mixed and single gender group contexts. In 10 of these groups subjects were 'At School' while the rest of the groups were comprised of young people who were no longer at school.
6. 16.3% Maori, 16.3% Pacific Islands, 9.1% Asian, 57.4% Pakeha (see note 7), 1% Other.
7. Pakeha is a term commonly used in New Zealand to denote non-Maori New Zealanders of European descent.
8. An umbrella definition to describe anyone who transgresses normative gender categories.
9. In New Zealand the 'Maori Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual and Transgender community have adopted this word to identify as being Maori and queer' (Definition from the New Zealand AIDS Foundation, Takataapui Pamphlet)
10. Intersex refers to 'people born with an anatomy that someone decided is not standard for male or female'. More specifically this means someone 'born with sex chromosomes, external genitalia, or an internal reproductive system that is not considered 'standard' for either male or female' (Intersex Society of North America, 2002 as sighted at <http://www.isna.org/drupal>).
11. By contrast 74.5% of young women had never consulted pornographic magazines as a source of information. Of those who had, only 3% reported finding them very useful. It is possible this is because a discourse of erotics can be accessed from other sources such as women's magazines.

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