

‘Living in Different Worlds’: gender differences in the developing sexual values and attitudes of primary school children

J. MARK HALSTEAD & SUSAN WAITE, *University of Plymouth, UK*

ABSTRACT *A small-scale study into the developing sexual values and attitudes of 35 9 and 10 year-old children found a number of important gender differences. The girls were more willing to offer detailed, serious reflections, whereas the boys’ contributions were shorter and more jokey, with a greater use of sexual slang. The family was the main source of sexual information for the girls, but friends and the media for the boys. The boys were more interested in contraception, abortion and the mechanics of intercourse and childbirth, whereas the girls were more interested in relationships and more aware of the pain that could be caused by loss of children and early pregnancy. The girls had clearer and more realistic aspirations than the boys in terms of both career and family life, and understood the dangers which drugs, alcohol and violence could pose to relationships; the boys, on the other hand, sometimes appeared insecure in their self-image, and tended, albeit in a joking manner, to link violence and sex. These findings are rich in implications both for policy and practice in sex education and more generally for an understanding of the way that a differentiated sexual identity develops in boys and girls.*

Introduction

The latest official guidance on sex education in England draws attention to the continuing widespread ‘uncertainty about what sex and relationship education is and how it should be taught’ (Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 2000, p. 3). This article takes as its starting point the belief that if sex education is to meet the needs of children and of society, it must help children to reflect critically on the sexual values, attitudes and understanding that they have already started to pick up in the course of their everyday lives, so that as they mature physically, their values, attitudes and understanding may also become correspondingly more mature. It is this values dimension which makes the activity of sex education genuinely educational rather than simply a matter of instruction, training or the transmission of information.

There are two important preliminaries to the planning of any such values-based approach to sex education. The first is the need for careful reflection on the nature of the explicit and implicit values which underpin the teaching. The second is the need to gain some insight into children's existing attitudes, values and conceptual schema, for without such knowledge it is difficult to ensure that sex education is 'tailored not only to the age but also to the understanding of pupils' (Department for Education [DFE], 1994, p. 6), or to predict how children will experience and interpret the sex education they are given. The first is a matter of philosophical clarification, the second a matter of empirical investigation. Both have suffered from comparative neglect in the rush to harness sex education to official health policy targets, such as halving the rate of conception among girls under the age of 16 (Department for Health, 1992). In particular, very little research has been carried out which involves talking directly to children about their sexual values and attitudes. These topics were specifically excluded from Goldman & Goldman's major study of children's sexual thinking (1982, pp. 20–22, 57). Other smaller studies have tended to focus mainly on identifying what the children already know about sex (see, for example, Bourne, 1995; Collyer, 1995), on the assumption that the biggest need is for the gaps in their knowledge to be plugged.

It was in response to this impoverished approach to sex education that a new research project was set up at the University of Plymouth in 1996 on 'Values and Sex Education'. The project involved three distinct elements:

- philosophical research, which attempted a systematic examination of the values relevant to sex education, paying particular attention to multicultural issues and to the conflicting frameworks of values underlying contemporary disagreements over the topic (the findings of this part of the research are reported in Halstead, 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 2000);
- ethnographic research at primary schools, which sought to explore the values, attitudes and beliefs regarding sex and sexual relationships of children prior to receiving any formal school-based sex education; and
- ethnographic research at a secondary school, which sought to examine the provision of sex education in the context of the developing values systems of adolescents.

The present article reports some findings from the second phase of the project. The aims of the work in primary schools were to examine children's ways of thinking about sexuality and relationships; to explore the developing values and attitudes which are implicit in these ways of thinking; to identify some of the main influences on these developing values and attitudes; and to explore how far the values underpinning programmes of sex education designed for children in primary schools are in line with or differ from the existing values of the children. It was hoped that the findings would enable sex education to be planned in a way which took greater account of children's existing understanding, needs and values.

However, like the alchemists of old, what we found was not necessarily what we were looking for. In our original planning and aims, we decided to interview the children in each school in a boys' group, a girls' group and a mixed group, simply because we suspected that their ability to talk freely might be affected by the kind of group they were in. This did in fact prove to be the case. However, one of the most important findings, that we had not anticipated, was the very large gulf that existed between the values and attitudes of the girls and those of the boys, in every area of the research. The present article discusses this finding in more detail and explores some of the implications for policy and practice in sex education.

Research Method

Research into children's values is always difficult, and since sex education is one of the most controversial areas of the curriculum, it is hard to imagine a more complex and sensitive area for research than children's developing sexual values. A detailed ethical code was devised, which clarified issues of confidentiality and anonymity, the provision of information to parents, the obtaining of permission to carry out the research, the right of the children to confide in their class teacher about any issue that was raised, the right to withdraw from the research at any time, and the responsibilities of the researchers if revelations of abuse occurred. In the event, no children withdrew from the research at any stage.

Detailed advance planning of the activities and research techniques was a further way of reassuring parents, teachers and children about the research, so that they knew precisely what information we wanted, why we wanted it and how we intended to gather it. We decided to meet the children in groups rather than individually, since this would probably be less threatening to the children and would enable them to take a greater lead in the discussions, with less input from the researcher (*cf.* Hazel, 1995). In any case, we were also interested in relationships and interactions and observing how meanings were negotiated between children. We planned to gather data in a variety of forms: oral contributions were to be taped and later transcribed, but the children would also be invited to write or draw pictures in response to a variety of stimuli. We were aware of the danger that interviewers may unintentionally influence children's responses, and so we planned to keep our own input to the discussions to a minimum, though we had a pre-arranged set of headings and prompt questions to fall back on and we did occasionally intervene to enable less dominant members of the group to contribute.

The research was carried out in two primary schools in the south-west of England. One had 403 pupils on roll (35% qualifying for free school meals), drawn from a socially mixed area of a city ranked as the thirty-first most deprived district in England in the 1998 Index of Local Deprivation. The city had a teenage pregnancy rate of 54 per 1000 women aged 15–17 between 1996 and 1998. The other school had 114 pupils (32% qualifying for free school meals), who were from a socially disadvantaged suburb of a generally more prosperous town. This area of the county had a teenage pregnancy rate of 21.8 per 1000 women aged between 15 and 17 (against a national figure for England and Wales of 46.4). Despite the differences in size and location, we found no significant differences between the responses from the two schools. It would, however, be worthwhile to repeat the study in a school with a markedly different social mix, to see whether the same attitudes were prevalent there. We originally included one such school in our research, a Roman Catholic school attracting a predominantly middle-class intake in a suburban area, but this school withdrew as the headteacher was apprehensive of adverse reactions from parents and governors.

The children we interviewed were all Year 5 pupils (aged 9–10) who had not yet been taught sex education in school. Three or four visits were made to each school, and on each visit, meetings took place with several groups of children, each containing six to eight pupils. In the first school, one male, one female and one mixed group were chosen at random from the register. However, the mixed group appeared to be far less willing to discuss issues freely, and so it was decided at the second school to ask the teacher to allocate participants to four single-sex groups. The groupings remained constant throughout the visits in an effort to build up a relationship of trust with the pupils. Each meeting lasted about 45 minutes.

The precise organisation of the visits varied according to the needs of each school, but the general pattern was that on the first visit the children were shown video extracts from a soap opera (*Neighbours* or *Eastenders*) as a stimulus for discussion. The children also had an opportunity to write about their reactions to the video clips and to discuss their personal interests and hobbies. On the second visit, the children were asked to discuss the people most important to them and what they thought their own future lives would be like. They were also encouraged to do some writing or draw a picture on the theme of the discussions. On the third visit, they were asked to respond, both in writing and in discussions, to some problems adapted from teenage magazines focusing on relationships and puberty. They also discussed what, when and by whom they thought they should be told about sexual matters.

The children generally had a very positive approach to the sessions, and although inevitably some were more vociferous than others, each member of each group made some contributions and provided a range of opinions, attitudes and values. Some children persisted in asking the researchers' opinions about issues, but when the question was bounced back to them this often elicited views and opinions from other children in the group. It is clear, however, that they did not regard the researchers as equivalent to their teachers; they made several remarks about the dire consequences of talking about sex to teachers, but they seemed to exhibit considerable freedom of expression and very little sign of embarrassment in the presence of the researchers.

The interviews were transcribed and various forms of analysis were used. Initially, a content analysis was carried out to discover what children of this age said about sex. As a result of repeated listening to the interviews and rereading the transcriptions, a number of common strands within the interviews were identified, including body changes; attitudes to the opposite sex and sexual relationships; reproduction and contraception; values in relationships; parenthood; and the value of the family. There was inevitably some steering of the discussions through the use of stimulus questions, but the children were responsible for the way the themes were taken up and developed. Subsequent analysis of the contributions showed interesting patterns of gender dominance in the take-up of the different themes. These are discussed in the next section and provide the main focus of the present article.

Findings

Gender Differences in Style of Discussion

Although there had been no gender-specific emphasis in the data collection, significant gender differences in styles of conversation and discussion emerged from the analysis. For example, analysis of the conversational pattern of the boys' and girls' groups showed that only 13% of the boys' contributions were more than one line in length, whereas 31% of the girls' were. The analysis also clarified the way sex was discussed. The boys tended to talk over one another, while the girls often gave lengthy personal accounts of experiences. The boys appeared excited by the chance to discuss sex without sanction, but their contributions were often made up of joking or macho posturing.

Boy: Oh, I'm going into labour.

Boy: Who with? Tony Blair?

Laughter was 12 times more prevalent in the boys' groups than in the girls', and sexual slang was used only within the boys' groups.

Attitudes to Body Changes

The number of contributions by boys on the topic of body changes was roughly equivalent to that of the girls, but the difference lay in the seriousness with which they were discussed:

Girl: Miss, my mum said when she was little—she was about 9 or 10, about our ages—when she went to the toilet, there was blood there and she started crying. She almost packed her bags and ran away 'cos she was frightened.

Researcher: She didn't know what was happening at all?

Girl: No, and because she said her mum and dad never warned her that it would happen and it scared her so much, she almost ran away.

Boy: You get hairs.

Boy: Ugh! [*giggle*]

Boy: They grow ...

Boy: Breasts.

Boy: We've got muscles.

Boy: You get pubic hairs there and around your belly button.

Researcher: What sort of age do you think that's going to happen?

Boys: 14 or 15. [*some disagreement in group*] It is! It is! It does! I know!

The boys' discussion was characterised by rapid enumeration of features that would occur in a few years' time; perhaps the more distant prospect of change accounts for some of their lack of seriousness. Although they saw the growth of body hair as faintly disgusting, the boys' comments still had a 'macho' element: 'We've got muscles'. In contrast, the girls' concerns were generally more personal and immediate than the boys', and they did not comment on how boys would change. Their remarks showed the greater apprehension they felt about puberty, which for some was already beginning. Despite having been told about periods by their mothers, it was not evident that the girls knew what they actually were or why women have them. Some had been told or found out things very early (at around 6 or 7 years old) and at this age it might have been difficult to take in the whole picture. It may also be that some mothers did not know the biological facts of periods and concentrated rather on reassuring their daughters that they were not life threatening.

Attitudes to the Opposite Sex and Sexual Relationships

In discussing their ideal woman, the boys valued both 'looks' and being loyal or having 'time for them'. This split allure is epitomised in the two volunteered examples of ideal women—Pamela Anderson and 'my mum'.

Researcher: How important are looks in choosing a girlfriend?

Boy: Looks don't matter. It's what's inside.

Boy: All that'll be inside is sort of love trying to burst out.

Boy: No, what S means is what's under their clothes [*giggling*].

Boy: No, it's what's under their skin.

Boy: I forgot to wear a vest today, miss.

Boy: Don't be stupid. It's what's bursting out what's inside. Like someone could have a face like this [*pulls grotesque face*], and someone might love them, and we might think they're stupid, but inside they're a really nice person.

The boys sometimes expressed fear of being made to look foolish if they asked girls out:

Boy: Are they gonna say no or are they gonna go off laughing and that?

Boy: No one likes me.

Boy: I've got a girlfriend, but she doesn't like me.

The boys seemed quite insecure about their attractiveness to girls, and were inclined to be dismissive and critical of others—particularly gays—to protect their own self-esteem. One boy gave some insight into the weighty responsibility of maintaining his masculinity in a competitive world:

Boy: If you are a boy, you wish you were a girl sometimes.

This wistful remark was made in the context of the discussion about how difficult it was for boys to know if girls would be interested in them or not. The boys seemed worried about being made to look a fool by making the first move. This boy wished that the onus did not always lie with him as a male to 'compete' with others for the females' attention and the status this afforded. But more commonly, the boys hid their insecurity and confusions behind a facade of bravado, jokes and violent language, so that the emotions of desire and violence became mixed up:

Researcher: Did I ask you last time about the things you're really looking forward to about being grown up?

Boy: Yeah.

Boy: Having it with Victoria.

Boy: Throwing my sister out of the house. I want her to get mugged.

Boy: I'll tell you what I want, what I really, really want—Victoria and the Spice Girls. I want to hold her.

Boy: I want all those Spice Girls, can't wait for all those Spice Girls to get thrown out the window by their hair.

Their solution to some of the problems from teenage magazines was also violent:

Boy: She should slap the lady round the face and punch her.

Boy: No, that's being stupid, D.

Boy: You should just pretend you're dead and they'd just walk away.

Boy: Yeah, kill the wife.

Boy: Get a machine gun, shoot them all.

Their attitude towards gays often appeared to be not so much one of violence and aggression as genuine repulsion. In response to a child's comment, the researcher at one stage asked what they meant by 'gay':

Boy: Put a knob up a ...

Boy: A man sexing a man.

Boy: When you're happy, that's gay [*joking*].

Boy: We've got two gays in our school and lesbian is when two ladies do it.

Boy: Up S. B., we was in this club, and there was these gay gypsies in there, load of gays, then some bloke picks him up and starts kissing him and then these blokes start kissing and dancing together, so they get chucked out.

Researcher: What do you think about it? Do you think it's OK?

Boy: Kissing each other, snogging, it's sick!

Boy: It's sick, sick, because it's two men ...

However, such vehement disapproval was not universal; after a barrage of homophobic contributions, a lone voice spoke up for individual freedom of choice:

Boy: I don't really like actual gay but I think it's up to the people, um, it's their decision to be actually gay if they want to be.

The self-protective aggression of the boys contrasts with the sad acceptance of being 'dumped', which the girls discuss in the following exchange about a boyfriend:

Girl: He could change.

Girl: Yesterday, Miss, he said he'd never dump me again, 'cos he dumped me three, um, two times, but yesterday he said he'd never dump me again.

Girl: Yeah, but he will soon [*sad, wistful tone*].

Girl: But you don't know that, he might not.

Girl: Might still be together.

Researcher: Why did he dump you before?

Girl: He wanted to go out with me and C at the same time.

Girl: Two timing.

Girl: C broke up with me 'cos she wanted S to go out with, to play with, so J said he'd go out with me 'cos I wouldn't have no one to play with and stuff like that.

Some of the girls also seemed to be aware that it might not be long before they had their first sexual encounter, and that this might occur 'accidentally' (i.e. as a result of drinking, sexual curiosity or getting caught up in a sequence of events for which they had not planned). They therefore felt they should be told about sex at a comparatively early age, so that they knew what was coming and so that they could be more in control of what happened to them:

Girl: I think in case just by accident you get into it, you need to know it.

Girl: Sometimes, I know I'm only 11, I feel like I was going to do it. I'm not being horrible or anything. It keeps coming into my mind, but I know I'm not going to.

Girl: We should know most things but not things too serious like for us to get into, because we might get into it too quick.

Statements like this were not made by the boys, who were more interested in practical help in engaging in sex, within the context of a generally more flippant attitude.

Boy: If you have a baby, like at N. D. a little girl's just had one (I'm hearing now that she's only 12 and she's had one), we should know it—how to have sex—when we're younger, so that if we want we can have it when we're younger ... at the right time.

Some girls felt knowledge might lead to more involvement with sex, but this was counterbalanced by others who felt knowledge might deter and prevent experimentation. Curiosity could be a powerful force:

Girl: You may want to do it so you know what it's like.

As we shall see, many girls were aware of the problems of early pregnancy, but some could not wait to be more grown up and tended to see a connection between sexual experience and being grown up:

Girl: 'Cos when you're young you sort of want to be able to do it.

Reproduction and Contraception

One boy provided a full and fairly accurate account of how babies are made. The source

for this information was a film. Yet another film, *Junior*, where a man becomes pregnant, was also believed. The boys appeared unable to distinguish fully between a film which provided accurate factual detail and a Hollywood fantasy movie. It was clear, however, that the boys had thought about these matters and provided their own elaborations to explain extra features:

Boy: They have to cut this tube and tie it on the baby's belly button, and it goes back in the tube. Like an alien, it sucks it back in.

Boy: I think it's a cord, innit?

Boy: They have to snap it, don't they?

The boys struggled to make sense of the snippets of information they gleaned, and having information about sex seemed to be important to their image as competent masculine figures.

Over two-thirds of the contributions about contraceptives and abortion were from boys. Apparently, they had seen many condoms on the streets, and friends of the same age had bought them, albeit to play with or chew. Both girls and boys were aware that they were used to prevent sperm from entering a woman's body and that they came in different flavours. Another way mentioned to avoid having babies was 'not doing sex', but a boy responded, 'No, but you enjoy it'. Boys and girls were also aware of contraceptive pills, and injections were mentioned by one girl. This awareness seems to have occurred despite reported reluctance by parents to explain:

Girl: My dad let it out when I was 7–9. I was in the room and dad brought in this big packet of those things, and I thought that and I asked my dad what it is, and he said, 'You do not want to know'. I said, 'Please tell me', because I didn't know what it was. I had to know what it was, because I knew that sometimes he comes into my room and takes whatever he wants, so I had to ask him what it is in the bag. He said, 'Oh, it's nothing you need to know about. If you want to know, ask your mother'. So I went to my mum and my mum said, 'No, I'm not going to tell you'. But my dad accidentally let it out one day, 'cos I was listening one day—you can hear through the floorboards, can hear my dad talking about them. I zoomed upstairs ... and my mum and dad were talking about the packets, and my mum was saying, 'You shouldn't have these in L's sight'. I put my head down against the floorboards (that's when I didn't have my new carpets, 'cos you can't hear now; I have to go down to the door). My dad accidentally let it out to my mum that they were condoms and the day after, I told him I could hear, and he goes, 'I suppose you want to know the proper reason why then'. He goes, 'When you actually put it on, it stops it going in, the sperm, into the woman's body, 'cos they don't want to have kids'. I go, 'How come in pubs there are these condom machines, they're flavoured like strawberry, cherry, like that?'

Boys also cited abortion as a way to stop having babies, but were very unclear about what this meant. One group confused the word with 'orphan', although they were able to define orphan when asked. Versions of abortion included sticking a cotton wool bud in and opening a little gap, and the following graphic account:

Boy: This woman was having a baby and she decided that she didn't want one because it would be too much housework and everything with the baby throwing up all the time, and the man didn't want one either. He agreed with her and, um, later opened her stomach and put a pin in her mouth and she

swallowed it and then she put this big thin blue thing inside, and it was like 24 hours after that, the, say the woman was like that [he indicates abdomen distended], 24 hours after that it was getting down, down, down to a normal size.

Researcher: So like the pin had popped a balloon?

Boy: Yeah.

Boy: But it killed the baby?

Boy: Yeah, it like stabbed the baby.

The elaboration of partial knowledge in this way was particularly prevalent in boys, coupled with their claims to 'know it all' already.

Values in Relationships

Two-thirds of the comments about values within relationships were from girls. This may reflect a more analytical understanding of relationships by the girls. The girls seemed more confident about explaining motives for actions in relationships. The positive values identified included honesty, being straight with people and telling them face-to-face when a relationship was over. The motivation for this seemed to be partly that this was preferred to finding out by another route, and also for personal safety, as not being straight could lead to violent consequences:

Girl: I'd rather tell them up front than use an excuse, because they're gonna find out the excuse anyway. They'll find out what you're doing anyway.

Girl: I'd be straight 'cos if you lie they're gonna find out anyway and might harm you.

Girl: ... and he might slap you for not telling him straight.

Loyalty was also valued, and 'standing by' or 'sticking up for' were frequently mentioned. Divorce was not wholly condemned, however. Both boys and girls were uncertain over whether divorce was too easy, and seemed to pass judgement according to whether couples were 'right' together.

Girl: I reckon she goes better with David. I don't know why, she just does.

They were disapproving of 'using' people, for example, to make someone jealous, for their money or to get custody of children. In a scene from *Eastenders* used as a stimulus to discussion, where Grant is trying to get Lorraine to support his custody battle with Tiffany, two sets of values conflicted. On the one hand, both boys and girls thought Lorraine should stand by Grant and support him even if she had other problems, and on the other hand, they felt Grant was just using people to get custody of the child.

Girls discussed the impact of drink and drugs on relationships far more than boys, but were divided about whether love could enable people to give up drink or drugs. Drugs in particular were seen as something which could take over your life. They did not want to marry drug-takers because they felt they could be dragged down by it, although one girl pointed out that women could become drug-takers themselves. The girls were very aware of male violence perpetrated against neighbours and acquaintances. One girl cited her babysitter, who had family problems and had taken an overdose after being raped. Another knew the names of all the drugs which an acquaintance had taken when depressed and suicidal. They reported that underage drinking was quite common, and linked alcohol to violent behaviour:

Girl: There's someone in our street—he's an alcoholic—and his girlfriend's

just had a baby, and she won't let him see it because he won't stop drinking, and she's turned round and told him that if he really cared about the baby he'd stop, and yesterday he went round and smashed the whole flat up.

Girl: ...'cos his dad was one of the type that begs the woman to have the kids and then he didn't want to, he just bashed them about.

Girl: Down in D in this park, my stepdad's ex-singing partner's daughter was carrying her baby down the park and late at night 'cos she didn't know what to do, and then her husband came over and got her and strangled her and she dropped the baby [*sharp intake of breath from group*], and then she managed to get away and she went in her house and then her husband knocked the door down, grabbed the baby and nearly killed the baby.

Girl: Was that on *The Bill*?

Girl: No, that's true life.

The girls volunteered further examples of the way 'true life' in their experience reflected the tough values portrayed in television programmes. They also related these issues to their plans for their own future lives, for example, by not wanting a husband who smoked or took drugs. This contrasted with the boys' confusion over fantasy and reality in films and television.

Attitudes to Parenthood

While the input regarding conception and the care of babies was evenly divided between boys and girls, the girls made far more contributions about when to have babies and about the 'ownership' of babies and the possibility of losing them. Girls also mentioned the risks of smoking and drinking while pregnant, but were divided on the issue of breastfeeding. Several boys and girls had experience of babysitting and caring for younger siblings. Some boys agreed that the responsibility of caring for babies should be shared:

Boy: Both parents, halfy halfy.

Another boy, however, jokingly suggested that his wife (a Spice Girl) would do all the work. More seriously, yet without any sense of having said something sexist, a further boy implied that babies were girls' business:

Boy: We're going on about babies, but the girls should be going on about that really.

The girls were generally very well aware of the problems associated with having a baby young:

Girl: There's two things I'm not looking forward to when I'm getting older. One is having a baby when I'm too young and I won't have any help, like in *Emmerdale*. And the other one is like having a baby. It scares me, 'cos when you watch it on telly it looks hard work.

Their main concern was the impact having a baby would have on their lives and the lack of support they would receive for what was seen as hard work. Some girls suggested their parents would take a supportive role:

Girl: ... Although they'd be a bit angry, I think they'd be pleased to have a grandson or daughter.

Family was most often mentioned as who they would want to have around them when they had a baby. Their boyfriend was less definitely part of the picture:

Girl: He'll probably be working.

Girl: Yeah, but he'll stand by you, I expect.

Girl: If you got married, he'll be down the pub drinking! [*laughing*]

In spite of the general rejection of early pregnancy, there seemed to be a very strong awareness among the girls of the potential strength of maternal feelings. This came out through their discussion of the loss of a baby through miscarriage, cot death or other cause, and also the discussion of the rights of the natural mother, no matter how young she was. Giving birth seemed to confer a special privilege, which the girls rated more highly than the rights of the father or adoptive parents. Overall, however, the girls seemed acutely aware of the pain that violent families, loss of children and early pregnancy could cause and were afraid of being left alone without support.

The Value of the Family

The family, particularly mothers and older sisters, was the main provider of sexual information for the girls, though sometimes, as we have seen, the children picked up information accidentally by listening in to family discussions. Some of the boys were waiting for the 'big talk' from their parents, but far more boys than girls appeared to rely on friends, television, videos and magazines for their sexual information. However, the films they mentioned often had 18 certificates (i.e. only suitable for those aged over 18), and some of the boys were familiar with pornographic videos and magazines. This may provide an explanation for the links they often made between sex and violence, and their view of sex as a cause for much hilarity. It may also explain why there appears to be such a gulf between the family-oriented sexual values of the girls and the 'adult' entertainment-oriented sexual values of the boys.

In the group interviews, the girls made about a third more references to family than the boys. The pictures and written descriptions of families produced in one school also seemed to suggest that the concept of family was more important for girls, with family, pets and possessions featuring more in the girls' pictures than in the boys'. Strong family bonds were very clearly evident in girls' diagrams of the 'people most important to me', and sometimes their pictures were of family members with their arms around each other. Boys, on the other hand, were more likely to depict their 'cool' friends and peers than members of their family (where 'coolness' is defined in terms of wearing sunglasses and trainers with high status brand names), and one boy included his 'worst enemy' in the 'people most important to me'.

The girls seemed to take more notice than the boys of their parents' views about suitable occupations (and perhaps this resulted in the girls having more realistic career aspirations):

Researcher: What sort of things would you like to do when you grow up?

Girl: My mum wants me to be a nurse, but my dad wants me to be a police lady.

Girl: Mum and dad want me to be a police lady, but I want to be a shopkeeper.

Girl: I want to be a hairdresser. I think my mum wants me to do that as well.

Boy: I want to be a pop star.

Boy: I'm going to go round the world with my dad and be a professional snooker player.

Sometimes girls portrayed the family as unconditionally supportive:

Girl: Even if you did do wrong, they always stick up for you.

But respect for family opinions and feelings of family loyalty rarely spilled over into sentimentality among the girls. They were often critical of their mothers, for interfering or for not respecting them or taking account of their feelings:

Girl: She may want to listen to her mum, but sometimes you don't have to because it's up to you what you want to do because it's *your* choice.

Girl: I'll have the baby when *I* think is right.

Girl: Sometimes mums can take your babies away.

Girl: Sometimes they can be like pests when you have your baby.

Girl: If I was pregnant and I tell my mum and she pesters me and that, I'd just say, 'Get lost'.

Girl: Her mum didn't say she loved her.

Girl: Her mum didn't want her.

Girl: I know one who smokes at 14 and because her mum's on pills, her mum doesn't really know what she's doing. There's a man in her life that's screwed her mind up.

Girl: She's been letting her daughter do anything and everything.

Although the last two comments are critical of a mother's irresponsibility towards her daughter, the criticism comes from a value base of clear expectations of how a mother ought to behave, offering advice and guidance to her daughter and not allowing too much freedom. Fathers, on the other hand, are sometimes criticised for being overprotective towards girls:

Girl: My dad, if he had a boy, he wouldn't be like it, but because it's a girl, he's so protective over girls. Because he's so protective, he won't let us go near boys, so whenever we're in school I got to stay away from boys, but I don't. But in the street, my next door neighbour and other neighbour, I'm only allowed to play with one, which is Wendy, because she's a girl, but not the other neighbour because it's a boy. My dad said if he catches me going anywhere near a boy he'll absolutely kill me, but I do anyway at school.

Although the family is evidently very important for girls, they are also beginning to make up their own mind about issues and becoming aware of the fallibility of the adults around them. Such signs of growth towards independence and autonomy were not so apparent among the boys. One boy seemed to go out of his way to annoy his mother, though this did not necessarily meet with the approval of his peers:

Boy: I want to be a pop star, you know ... Yeah, that's because my mum doesn't want me to be one, so I'll be one just to get on her nerves.

Boy: You don't like your mum.

Boy: You should do, you should do.

One group of children was asked to write down thoughts about their own future lives, and marriage and having children featured in the comments of both boys and girls more frequently than future jobs or careers. The boys' responses were sometimes stereotypical and sexist:

Boy: I'll get married, I prefer one boy and one girl 'cos then a girl can do shopping with their mum and the boy can go off and play football with the dad.

However, the girls had generally thought through the reality of marriage and parenthood more fully; they often had names already chosen for their children, and, as already noted, also had a clearer idea of the kind of behaviour they would consider unacceptable in a partner, such as smoking or taking drugs.

Discussion

Gender Differences

Both boys and girls in this sample demonstrated a high level of interest in sexual matters prior to formal school-based sex education, a willingness to talk and reflect on existing knowledge, an eagerness to learn more, a high degree of self-awareness, and strong feelings about many of the issues raised in the research. However, it has also become clear from this study that the boys and girls differed widely in their approach to sexual matters, in the issues they were particularly interested in, and in their developing values and attitudes.

The boys tended to volunteer more 'facts' than the girls, but to have less accurate information. Their attitude was generally more flippant, sometimes bordering on rudeness, and they had a perception of sex as funny. Other research suggests that it is part of the maintenance of masculine status to behave in macho ways involving horseplay and joking (Morgan, 1992, p. 92; Connell, 1987). Pretending to know more about sex than they actually did appeared to be part of a general macho response in front of others. Such macho posturing may also have been linked to the fear of being thought 'gay'. The boys were more interested than the girls in the mechanics of intercourse and childbirth and in contraception and abortion. They depended on friends and the media more than on their immediate family for information about sex and for their own developing sexual values, and several had already watched 'adult' videos. This may partly explain why, albeit jokingly, they tended to link sex and violence. In spite of their macho posturing, however, there was evidence of a lack of confidence among many of the boys in their relationships with the girls.

The girls spoke more reflectively than the boys, giving the impression that they had thought more carefully about their own futures, their expectations from relationships and the importance of the family. The girls relied much more than the boys on their immediate families (particularly mothers and older sisters) for sexual information and values. The girls stressed the need for honesty and loyalty in relationships, and were aware of the dangers posed by alcohol and other drugs. They were interested in parenthood, often having planned out how many children they wanted themselves and when they wanted them. They had a strong sense of the rights of the natural mother and the trauma of losing a child. They were curious about the experience of sexual relations, though this was balanced by an awareness of the difficulties that would result from early pregnancy, and sometimes they felt powerless between dominant fathers and boys they could not trust.

Of course, there are exceptions to this general picture, and too much must not be drawn from a small sample. However, as a snapshot of the sexual attitudes and values of a group of 9–10 year-old boys and girls, this study provides useful insights into the way that they have been socialised to think about sexual matters and into the gulf that has opened up between boys and girls even at this age in their attitudes to sex. The findings are relevant in a number of ways to both policy and practice in sex education, and suggest possible avenues for further research.

Implications for Sex Education Policy

The comments provided by the girls do not lend support to apocryphal stories of young girls getting pregnant intentionally or wanting babies as an unquestioning source of love. On the contrary, the girls in this sample seemed very well aware of the problems of early pregnancy, which they were able to spell out quite clearly. However, there was a sense among some of the girls of not being fully in control of their own lives, and they were aware of the possibility that their early sexual encounters might occur ‘accidentally’, i.e. unintentionally as a result of drink or fear of being ‘dumped’, rebellion against overprotective fathers or simply out of curiosity. In so far as government policy aims at a significant reduction in the number of teenage pregnancies, the findings suggest that the need is not so much for sex education to spell out even more clearly the problems of early pregnancy, as is so often claimed (see, for example, Waugh, 1999), but for girls to be helped to gain more control over their own lives. This suggests the need at a personal level for a stronger emphasis on personal and emotional education, assertiveness training, and education for personal autonomy, and at a social level for greater account to be taken of the link between the teenage pregnancy rate and social factors such as poverty. The personal factors will undoubtedly be helped by the official decision to root sex and relationship education firmly within the new Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) framework (DfEE, 2000, p. 3), but the social factors have much broader implications for social policy.

Official guidance on sex and relationship education seems to be much more in line with the values of the girls in this sample than those of the boys (cf. DfEE, 2000, p. 5). The girls appeared more aware of the importance of the family, the dangers to relationships of alcohol and other drugs, and the need for loyalty and honesty in relationships. They also had a strong belief in the rights of the natural mother and a strong sense of attachment to babies. It seems reasonable to expect girls to be more receptive to a sex education that is based on a framework of values that they understand and share. But there is a danger, as the latest DfEE guidance recognises, if the needs of boys are comparatively neglected (DfEE, 2000, p. 11). If boys perceive sex education to consist of a long list of negative messages, combined with threats about financial penalties, they are more likely to switch off. Sex education could perhaps take more account of the role of humour in boys’ responses to sexual issues (cf. Kehily & Nayak, 1997). It must help boys to develop a positive self-image based not on macho posturing but on a sense of having an important and responsible role to play within the family and the broader society. It must also help boys to develop appropriate critical responses to the ‘adult’ videos and magazines they see and to reflect critically on the links they make between violence and sex (cf. Davidson, 1995, p. 70; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997; Lamb, 1997).

Since some of the boys in our sample seem to have picked up marked homophobic attitudes by the age of 9 or 10, this points to the need for clear guidelines in this area. In particular, such guidelines should spell out the unacceptability of all forms of bullying (including physical, psychological or verbal abuse directed at homosexuals), the need to respect others and treat them fairly regardless of sexual orientation, and the importance of accepting a diversity of lifestyles within society so long as such lifestyles do not involve harm to others (cf. DfEE, 2000, pp. 12–13).

Implications for Sex Education Practice

The research shows that children generally look to their parents for sexual information and guidance, and that this teaching goes on in various forms, including direct guidance,

teaching by example and providing information in an accidental or unplanned way (cf. Plant, 1995, p. 42). However, it is clear that not all parents teach their children about sex, and research by Allen (1987) suggests that there is a gender difference in such teaching, with fathers much less likely than mothers to take the initiative and boys less likely than girls to be taught by their mothers. What emerges from this is that the school has an important threefold role in relation to sex education: (a) to work in partnership with the parents where possible—not only informing parents about the content of sex education lessons but positively trying to build on what has been taught at home; (b) to add to children's existing knowledge; and (c) to help children to make sense of the total input and to construct their own sexual knowledge, values and attitudes more reflectively and systematically on the basis of the variety of influences to which they have been subjected. As Sherrard points out, beliefs are dynamic and flexible, undergoing shifts and variations as conversation develops: 'they are not simply a property or product of one individual; they are jointly produced by people interacting with one another' (1997, p. 71).

The question arises whether early sex education should be provided in mixed or single-sex groupings. Both boys and girls in this research were emphatic that they preferred to be taught separately (though other research evidence suggests that this will change as they grow older; cf. Kakavoulis & Forrest, 1999). The main reason given was embarrassment, which made it more difficult to be honest about worries or ignorance in the presence of the opposite sex. In the mixed group, for example, there was considerable diffidence in the discussion of periods, with one girl coding them 'P'. On the other hand, Allen's research (1987) shows that pupils found it particularly helpful to learn about the feelings and views of the opposite sex, and mixed discussions would seem to be an obvious and important way of achieving mutual understanding.

There is a possibility that the predominance of female teachers in primary schools may result in the unintentional marginalising of boys' distinctive needs and perspectives. We may have fallen into this trap ourselves in our research by using an excerpt from a soap opera to stimulate discussion; Fiske (1987) sees the soap as a relationship-oriented feminine narrative with multiple characters and plots and no endings, in contrast to masculine narratives, which are goal-centred with single plots, fast action and minimal dialogue (cf. Salisbury & Jackson, 1996). We found a gender difference in the types of television programmes and videos mentioned, which mirrored this. The gender of the teacher may also be important in other ways: the boys in our research appeared to believe that speaking to female teachers about sex was a punishable offence, and relished the chance our research provided for them to discuss sex in school without sanction, though they did occasionally take the opportunity to show off in front of an adult female. Other research also suggests that delivery of sex education by a female teacher may tend to inhibit boys' ability to respond and ask questions (Mearor *et al.*, 1996; Walkerdine, 1981). In sex education, as in other areas, boys clearly benefit from male role models.

The claim of the boys we interviewed to 'know it all already' corresponds to findings reported by Mearor *et al.* that a contributory factor to the negative reactions of boys of 14 and 15 to the sex education lessons they received was that they knew most of it already and found the activities childish (1996, p. 281). Given the presence of this attitude 4 or 5 years earlier, schools must find some means to circumvent such shutting down to 'official' sex education. It is possible that older peers and the media, both extensively used by boys at present as sources of information (cf. Epstein & Johnson, 1998, p. 197), may prove more acceptable than teachers as providers of sex education in schools, so long as any television programmes used are not too dated or alien in terms

of the patterns of home life presented. Since the boys are so sure that they do have knowledge about sexual matters (though this knowledge has been shown to be inaccurate), it would also be important to allow opportunities for these misunderstandings to be aired, discussed and corrected, in a context which does not undermine their developing self-image and self-esteem.

Implications for Further Research

Many of the issues came to light because of the way the research was carried out—allowing the children to set their own agenda for discussions, to expand on issues which interested them and to pass over issues they did not want to discuss. However, there was a need for a greater sensitivity to gender issues in the practical planning of research, for example, in the choice of stimulus material. More work is needed on research methodology in this area.

We also became aware that the gender of the researcher might have a significant influence on the research findings in this area, both in terms of obtaining a different response from interviewees and in terms of approaching the research with different taken-for-granted values and assumptions. Our literature review identified significant gender differences in adults who write about sex education. For example, two male writers—Wilson (1965, p. 145) and Jones (1989, p. 57)—mention the role of sex education in developing a greater sense of style, satisfaction and fun in sexual relations, and a further male writer (Ford, 1991) offers a detailed discussion of what he calls a ‘recreational sexual philosophy’. These terms and the attitudes which they imply are rarely found among female writers on sex education, who generally adopt a more serious tone and spend more time on issues to do with relationships.

The research was carried out among mainly working-class children in one of England’s ‘white shires’. Further work is needed to explore how different the findings would be in a more multicultural context, and in more middle-class settings.

There is a need to link sex education research more closely to theories of the nature of sexuality and gender identity. The findings of the present study clearly have relevance for the theoretical study of childhood acquisition of gendered sexual identity (cf. Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Jackson, 1982). There is some evidence in our research which tends to support a Freudian view of sexuality as an instinctual drive, but much more which points to the social construction of the gendered differences in the children’s emerging sexual values and attitudes. We were aware throughout the research that the children were under considerable pressure in school to conform to heterosexual expectations (cf. Epstein, 1997; Renold, 2000), but also that they were constructing meaning for themselves through interaction with others and developing expectations of themselves and others. As Plummer states:

Through interaction he [the child] builds up commitments, perspectives, taken for granted views, self-conceptions. Such interactive constraints also play a key part in the stabilisation of his sexual world. He faces ‘problematic sexual situations’ and evolves ‘perspectives’; he becomes attached to the values of some groups and not others; he comes to view himself as a particular kind of ‘sexual being’ (or non-sexual being) and he develops a rudimentary, dimly sensed world-view of sexuality. All this can be modified as he encounters new experiences but they also serve to restrict his perceived range of alternative choices. (1975, p. 40)

Interactionist perspectives like this are of relevance to feminist theories, since they identify the acquisition of differentiated gender attitudes and identities as a social process rather than as a result of pre-existing biological or psychological structures (cf. Vance, 1992) and add weight to the view that the construction of a gendered sexual identity is a prerequisite to the establishment of a social structure based on a gender hierarchy (cf. Jackson, 1982, pp. 87–88). What this perspective also suggests is that the values and attitudes learned or developed in childhood have a more important influence on adult sexuality than any instinctual or drive urges. This is why a carefully thought out approach to sex education is so important.

Correspondence: J. Mark Halstead, Faculty of Arts and Education, University of Plymouth, Douglas Avenue, Exmouth EX8 2AT, UK.

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