

Should sex education in primary schools pay more attention to children's developing emotional and spiritual understanding?

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'Love and Trust': Making Space for Feelings in Sex Education

In the second of two reports on the sexual attitudes and values of 9 and 10 year-olds, the connections between spiritual, emotional and sexual development are explored.

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There is an ongoing debate in sex education between those (let's call them the 'minimalists') who believe that nothing should be allowed to get in the way of the central goal of reducing teenage pregnancy and the growth of sexually transmitted infections and those (the 'maximalists') who believe that sex education can never be separated from a broader context of understanding about relationships, values and emotions.

The main argument put forward by the 'minimalists' is that anything other than a value-free, non-judgmental approach is likely to put students off, and that if sex education is dismissed by students as 'moralising', an important chance to influence their behaviour will have been lost. The 'maximalists' may reply that values and emotions permeate all our decisions relating to sex, and thus it is better to bring them out into the open and discuss them rather than ignore them. If children are not given direct guidance and help in such discussions at school but are left to explore their own emotions and values as and when they can, the 'maximalists' claim, this may leave them vulnerable and open to exploitation at the hands of those less concerned for their wellbeing than the school is.

From an educational point of view, the 'maximalist' argument seems to be winning through, to judge from the growing number of books and articles on values and sex education

(Blake & Katrak, 2002), (Halstead, 2001a), (Halstead & Reiss, 2003), (Reiss, 1997). Children and young people want sex education to include emotions and values; a common complaint about sex education by the pupils (especially the girls) both in our own research and in Measor's (2000) was that 'there was no chance to talk about the feelings' and 'they tell us about the danger, never the love and enjoyment'. At a governmental level, ever since the Department for Education began issuing circulars offering guidance on sex education, provision has been set in a context of children's spiritual and moral development (Dept. of Education & Science, 1987), (Dept. for Education, 1994), (Dept. for Education and Employment, 2000).

Teachers

But this does not make things any easier for teachers. Halstead and Reiss (2003, ch.8), list a number of reasons why teachers may find it difficult to talk to their pupils about love, for example. They may feel embarrassed talking about such a powerful emotion; they may feel it is a private matter where they have no right to intrude on pupils' personal lives; they may find it hard to do justice to the wide range of cultural perspectives on love; or they may feel that love does not lend itself to rational discussion. The answer, we believe, is not to ignore the topic (for many people see love as highly important to

human wellbeing in terms of sexual enrichment, moral guidance and spiritual fulfilment), but to reflect carefully on the most appropriate ways to introduce the topic in schools.

A sensible place to begin is where the children are, and this involves listening to children and identifying their developing values and emotions. The research which is described here involves children aged nine and ten, and was designed to examine their sexual attitudes and values prior to formal, school-based sex education. The primary purpose of the research was to examine children's ways of thinking about sexuality and relationships, to identify the values and attitudes implicit in these ways of thinking, and to explore the extent to which the values underlying the sex education they receive are in line with their own developing sexual values and understanding. But the research also threw up other interesting findings, especially relating to the great gender divide apparent in the children's attitudes to sexuality at this age (Halstead & Waite, 2002), the ambivalence in their awareness of the spiritual potential of sexuality (Halstead & Waite, 2001a), and their developing understandings of love, trust and other emotions that arise in the context of sexual relationships (the subject of the present article).

Background

The research formed part of a larger project on 'Values and Sex Education' at the University of Plymouth. Two primary schools in the south-west of England, a large city school and a smaller school at the edge of a fairly prosperous town, took part. Despite differences in size and location, both had socially disadvantaged children on their roll, and we found no significant differences in the responses of the 51 children from the two schools. Three or four visits were made to each school, and on each occasion meetings of about 45 minutes took place with several groups of Year 5 pupils (aged 9-10), each containing six to eight pupils. The groupings remained constant over the series of visits so that the children were able to get to know and trust the researcher. At the first school we found that mixing boys and girls inhibited discussion, and so subsequent interviews took place in single-sex groups.

Talking about sex with children is a sensitive matter, and a detailed ethical code was prepared, making clear the aims and methods of our research; issues of confidentiality and anonymity; the right to withdraw at any time from the research; the right to raise any issues with the class teacher; and how revelations of

abuse would be handled.

Group interviews were chosen as they appeared less threatening to the children and enabled them to take a greater lead in the discussions with less input from the researcher, and we were also very interested in relationships and interactions and in discovering how meanings and values were negotiated between children. However, there were two main disadvantages. First, children could have been swayed by considerations of what others might think, and thus have been inhibited from expressing their deeper or more personal feelings; this is particularly relevant in research which is seeking to explore children's feelings and values like trust and love. Secondly, dominant members could influence the general tenor and direction of the discussion. We tried to ensure that all members of the group had an opportunity to contribute.

The children clearly regarded the researchers as other than teachers; several commented on the serious consequences of talking about sex to teachers, but in the presence of the researchers they showed considerable openness and freedom of expression.

School Visits

On the first visit the children were asked about their personal interests and hobbies to establish a relationship of trust and were shown video extracts from popular soap operas to warm them up to the idea of talking about relationships. Soaps were very familiar to the children, and spontaneous playground discussion of the issues raised in them was quite common. On the second visit, they discussed the people most important to them and what they thought their own future lives would be like, and they were given opportunities to do writing or drawing 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 interviews were transcribed and a content analysis was carried out to discover what children of this age said about sex, their awareness of bodily changes, their attitudes to the opposite sex and sexual relationships, the value of the family, parenthood, values in relationships, and gender differences in the responses (Halstead & Waite, 2001b). The data were also analysed to see what emotions they expressed and what connections, if any, were made by the

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children between feelings, values and sexuality.

Findings

In this section we look at the value which the children placed on love, their awareness of emotions in themselves and others, their sense of loyalty and commitment seen particularly in their relationships with their families, their feelings of embarrassment about sexual matters and their desire for self-direction and control over their own lives.

Values and Emotions

The build-up to adolescence is often seen as a time when softer emotional feelings may be denied in an attempt to appear more grown up, but even in the middle of a series of jokes the children in our sample would sometimes make a point which showed their awareness of emotions or spiritual and moral values. The following comments occurred as part of an extended and mainly light-hearted exchange of ideas in a boys' group on the topic of girls' looks:

Boy: "There's two things: good-looking, and if they're kind or something."

Researcher: "What's more important out of those?"

Boy: "If they're kind."

Love

In particular, the value of love featured extensively in the children's discussions. Writing about relationships, one child stated:

Girl: "I think relationships are about love and trust. If you really love someone you don't hurt their feelings or keep breaking up with them. You must be open to each other about your feelings. You don't rush your relationships else you might get upset."

The children may still be struggling to make sense of the love between two adults, but love itself is seen as a powerful motivating force which can change lives. For example, in a discussion of the impact of drink and drugs on relationships, some of the girls maintained that love could help people to give up drink or drugs. In their discussion of the video clips, the children held strong views about the 'rights' and 'wrongs' of the characters' actions, and love seemed fundamental to their moral judgments:

Girl: "If you really love someone, like Lorraine says she loves Grant, well if I was Lorraine and I really loved Grant I would care for Joe but I would also back him up because I loved him, so I would help him get custody of his own child ..."

Girl: "There are two things I was going to say about what A. said: I don't think he did just want the baby, I think he really did love her."

Girl: "Yeah, but - he did love her, but - until she lied to him ..."

There is clearly a need for more research

into what 'love' means to children and into what they think makes relationships special, but both boys and girls seemed to take love in some sense as fundamental to their own worldview.

Feelings

Both the girls and the boys in our study demonstrated in different ways a growing awareness of their own feelings. Some of the boys were aware of their own vulnerability and insecurity:

Boy: "It ain't hard to say I don't want to go out with you. It's hard to ask her out and that."

Boy: "Yeah, that's what I find hard."

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

The girls on the other hand sometimes showed a higher level of confidence and self-esteem:

Girl: "If I had a boyfriend, if he sort of like hurt me, I would call it off straightaway, 'cos there was this boy in the other class - he's not my boyfriend or anything - but he pushed me in the arm today for no reason. If I had a boyfriend who was anything like that, I wouldn't really like it."

Generally, the girls showed a greater awareness of the feelings of others than the boys. They talked about the special bond between mother and baby and showed an awareness of the 'wonder' of babies. Also, their ability to empathise without becoming sentimental gave them a powerful means to use the fictional dilemmas in the soap operas to begin to formulate their own set of values and aspirations. They began to construct a value code together, articulating values such as loyalty ('sticking by') and honesty ('being straight with') and considering the conflicting pressures on individuals. Their judgments were not black and white, as seen in the following discussion:

Girl: "This is about Alan and Frankie. I think it was wrong to go off with Frankie. I think he knew in the first place she was gonna use him. I don't think it was fair that he went off and left Carole and his children, and he just went off with Frankie and she went off with Tony and everything ..."

Girl: "It's about Grant and Lorraine. I reckon Grant was wrong to go with Lorraine 'cos I hate Lorraine 'cos she's nasty 'cos she won't give Grant custody of her child. I know she's got a lot of problems on her mind. And I reckon that Grant and Tiffany make a good couple."

Family Loyalty and Love

There was a strong emotional dimension in some children's understanding of sexuality and relationships in the context of their families. For the girls, their own developing sexuality reflected back to their families, as they

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considered examples of undesirable relationships, and mapped out their future within a clear framework of what they considered necessary for a stable family life. They appeared to believe that giving birth conferred special privileges, though they were also very aware of the difficulties that early pregnancy could cause. Some of the boys had also thought about parenthood:

Boy: "I'd like a little boy so I can inspire him."

Generally, however, the boys made fewer connections with their own upbringing and family, and had less rounded or practical visions for their future. This is seen in the following examples of their writing:

Boy: "My Life: BP is important to me with my mum, dad and sister. My girlfriend is BP. She doesn't like me. In ten years I may be a sex idol. I want to be a pop star."

Girl: "My Life: The most important things in my life are my parents and my dog. When I get older I hope to move out into a big bungalow. I also hope to have a happy marriage (sic) and to have children. I would like to be a vet and be in the Olympics in diving and tennis. When I get married I would like to get married in a little country church. I will only marry a boy who doesn't smoke or take drugs. The boy must like animals and be caring."

Although a few children complained of overprotective fathers and neglectful mothers, most seemed to take for granted mutual love between parents and children. When one boy spoke of doing something just to annoy his mother, others reprimanded him for it and stressed his duty to love her:

Boy: "You don't like your mum?"

Boy: "You should do, you should do."

In their discussion of early pregnancy, the girls generally believed that their parents would be supportive:

Girl: "If the baby had to be fostered, I would give it to my parents to look after ..."

Girl: "I think they would be a bit angry 'cos I had it at an early age, but I think they'd be pleased to have a grandson or daughter."

Girls made about a third more references to their families than boys, and they also mentioned them more frequently as a source of information about sex. Strong family bonds were clearly evident in the girls' drawings of 'people most important to me'; family members often had arms around each other or stood close together. On the other hand, one boy included his 'worst enemy' (sic) in his list of 'people most important to me', which may be a reflection of the more negative values apparent in many of the boys' contributions.

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Embarrassment

The joking attitude of the boys reflects their view of sex as entertainment but perhaps also their sense that it is 'dirty', ie something not to be talked about openly in front of adults. On one occasion when the researcher briefly left the room, the boys seemed to take delight in running through all the 'rude' words they could think of, while the girls tried to quieten them down:

Boy: "Do you think we should all lay down and have sex?" (*giggling*)

Girl: "No, this is recording your voice."

Boy: "I forgot about that."

Boy: "Prick."

Boy: "Vagina."

Boy: "Thighs, they get bigger."

Boy: "What about hugging?"

Boy: "Shagging, sex ..."

Girl: "This is going."

Boy: "Oh, I didn't know that. Who's listening to it?"

Boy: "Nipple."

Boy: "Boobs."

Boy: "Tits."

Girl: "You naughty little boy."

Many of the boys in our research spoke of playing with condoms, experimenting with sex lines, watching other boys expose themselves, looking at 'girlie' magazines and watching adult and pornographic videos. Their flippant attitude was not by and large shared by the girls, though they also recognised that they might become more serious as they grew older:

Boy: "When you're young, you think it's a joke, but when you're older you know it's serious."

The joking may have been something to do with maintaining a macho image. Certainly there was a widespread fear of being thought 'gay'. The facade of bravado, horse play and violent language may, like their claims to know more about sex than they actually did, have been an attempt to hide their own insecurities and confusions and maintain their masculine status. Their behaviour may also have been an attempt to embarrass the researchers, for similar underlying reasons, or to deflect some of their own embarrassment about sex (and their embarrassment about their own sexual worries or ignorance). The girls, on the other hand, were more likely to admit their embarrassment openly:

Girl: "Embarrassing talking to my parents about it: 'I'm doing THAT education today.'"

The girls also found ways of covering their embarrassment, for example, by coding to periods as 'P' when in a mixed group.

Some of the boys were aware of the dire

consequences of talking about sex to teachers. In one school, there was a file where such demeanours would be logged:

Boy: "You say anything to do with sex and they say 'Green file' or something."

Boy: "Yeah, shove your name on the list."

On another occasion a boy described bringing a book about sex into school which was confiscated by the teacher.

Self-Determination

The girls seemed generally very well aware of the problems of early pregnancy, which they were able to spell out quite clearly. Interestingly, falling in love was never mentioned by the girls as a prelude to sexual experience, though they had discussed feelings extensively on other occasions. 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' or rebellion against an over-protective father or simply out of curiosity:

Girl: "Some people don't think."

Girl: "What if they done it by mistake? Say if they were drunk, that's the problem."

Most did not expect to have their first sexual experience until the age of 16 or 18, but one of the main reasons they put forward for being taught about sex at a comparatively early age was so that they knew what was coming and so that they could be more in control of what happened to them:

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 these were not made by the boys, whose sexual references were more in the here and now and focused more on the immediate entertainment value of sex. The boys concentrated on the physical facts of intercourse, pregnancy, birth and contraception rather than the spiritual and emotional dimensions of relationships as the context for sexuality. In this respect our findings confirm those of Tunnicliffe, who reports that even at the age of eight boys were more interested in facts about pregnancy and birth and girls in feelings (Tunnicliffe, 2000).

Discussion

Although there are always difficulties in extrapolating from small-scale studies, by reassuring the children that we were not in a position of authority over them but were simply there to listen to them, we were able to create

research conditions in which they felt free to talk openly about sex and relationships. What they said, we believe, might be a truer reflection of their sexual knowledge, values and emotions than children usually reveal to adults. Almost all children of this age are exposed to the same sexual influences through television and other media, and in this sense we believe our sample is typical of the wider population of children.

The children placed a high value on love and expressed the belief that love could change lives. They identified a number of personal qualities which they thought were important in their own relationships, including kindness, trust, openness, honesty and loyalty. Their sense of personal identity was apparent in their awareness of their own feelings, and this was linked to the awareness of other people's feelings which the girls in particular showed in their discussions of soap operas and family relationships.

The girls emerge as generally more emotionally and spiritually aware than the boys. But the reasons for this finding are less clear-cut. Are girls socialised from early childhood into ways of thinking and behaving that are more inclined towards spirituality? Or is it simply that girls are naturally more sensitive to the emotions? Does this mean that we should encourage boys to be more like girls, or is the time ripe for a re-conceptualisation of the nature of emotional development in order to pay more attention to the way that boys develop? Clearly there is a need for much more research in this area.

Adults, both parents and teachers, may pass on their own embarrassment about talking about sex to children. There is something unhelpful in the children's perception that teachers disapproved of them talking openly about sex or bringing any books about sex into school. Parents - even those who model warm and caring relationships within the family - may find it hard to discuss topics such as love, sex appeal, desire, the strength of sexual emotions or the nature of sexual relationships with their children, or they may feel it inappropriate to do so. We found little evidence of parents discussing the myriad of sexual images on television with their children or helping them to understand or make sense of them.

Our research confirmed that much of the children's sexual knowledge and many of their values came from the media, especially television (Ward, 1995). The 'adult' videos which the boys had watched seemed to be the source of some of their confused emotions of sexual desire and violence. The girls, on the other hand, showed much more interest in discussing

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the emotions, relationships and moral dilemmas illustrated in soap operas and teenage magazines. These provide opportunities for the negotiation and development of values, and are among the few places nowadays where children learn about love. (This is not to undervalue the impact of some children's literature. Consider, for example, the glimpse of passion in the following passage:

“ The word *love* set his nerves ablaze. All his body thrilled with it, and he answered her in the same words, kissing her hot face over and over again, drinking in with adoration the scent of her body and her warm honey-fragrant hair and her sweet moist mouth that tasted of the little red fruit.” Pullman, 2000.)

Implications for Sex Education

If schools are to help children to reflect critically on the sexual values and emotions they pick up from a variety of sources during the course of their lives, it is clear that sex education in schools should involve much more than the transmission of knowledge. It should include education of the emotions and offer children opportunities to reflect on the nature of love, including sexual love, intimacy and desire. It should include an exploration of the part played by sex in personal development, and of the range of options open to individuals. It should provide children with opportunities to reflect on personal values such as forgiveness, sensitivity to others, loyalty, faithfulness, conscience, personal integrity and commitment, especially in the context of relationships and the family.

Sex education clearly cannot be restricted to one small component in the school timetable, and there are clear advantages if several subjects contribute to its delivery. But alongside the contribution that different subjects can make to sex education, schools need to pay attention to the 'hidden curriculum' of sex education. If teachers are embarrassed talking about sex, or if they imply that sex is 'dirty', pupils will consciously or otherwise pick up such messages. Pupils will learn much from the ethos of the school, from what is permitted and not permitted in the school rules and from the example set by teachers, and teachers need to be aware of the messages which they are passing on to pupils in this way.

Our research suggests that there are many ways in which the contribution teachers make towards children's sexual and spiritual values can be enriched. One way is a greater

willingness to respect children and listen to them. Another way involves paying more attention to the processes involved in children's learning and development. A further way is for teachers to reflect carefully on their own values and on the spiritual and moral example they set to children. Another way is for schools to ensure that children encounter different models of sexuality and emotional literacy through the curriculum, reflecting the many standpoints that exist, and to encourage children to discuss these and to construct their own worldview. All of these have clear implications for teacher training. But above all, there is a need for a clear vision of the purpose of education and its role in the development of human sexuality and emotional literacy.

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