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Sexpression:UK - A new vision for comprehensive sex and relationship education

In November 2000, a small group of pioneering students from University College London and the University of Sheffield met to discuss the shortage of comprehensive sex and relationship education (SRE) in the UK. SRE is still not a compulsory part of the UK national curriculum, despite the efforts of many groups including the [Sex Education Forum](#) and the [PSHE Association](#), and is poorly taught in many schools. Much of SRE in secondary schools is delivered didactically by teachers with little or no SRE-specific training. As outlined in OFSTED's most recent report (OFSTED, 2015), this method does not adequately equip young people with the knowledge they need to make informed decisions about sex and relationships. A new approach was needed; and thus [Sexpression:UK](#) was created.

The rationale behind the student-led organisation Sexpression:UK is to provide additional SRE teaching for primary and secondary schools pupils, alongside what is currently taught in schools. The organisation is run by university students from across the UK. Members are therefore close to the age of the school pupils, making it easier to discuss the sensitive and personal issues that SRE raises. The ultimate aim of this approach is to empower young people to make individual, informed decisions regarding their bodies and their health.

Currently there is no requirement for schools to teach SRE beyond the basic biology of reproduction. This has led to a focus on aspects such as anatomy of the reproductive organs within the national curriculum, with far less focus on the social and psychological aspects of sex and relationships. Important topics such as

pornography, sexuality, gender, sexual consent and body image are either poorly taught or missed out entirely, according to OFSTED (OFSTED, 2015). The situation is no different in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The most recent 2011 Education Act failed to adequately prepare schools to tackle rising issues around the Internet, social media and celebrity culture. Government guidance on SRE has not been updated since 2000 in England and the guidance in Scotland (The Scottish Government, 2014) fails to cover these essential areas of SRE. Advocacy therefore forms a fundamental part of Sexpression:UK's work; the organisation has campaigned hard for SRE to become a compulsory element of personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (Schulkind et al., 2015).

Working with local schools and youth clubs

In light of these issues, Sexpression:UK branches work with local schools and youth clubs to provide an additional perspective. We take a non-judgemental and open approach to facilitating small group discussions within the classroom. The near-peer format gives young people the confidence to actively participate in discussions and to ask sensitive and intimate questions. Sexpression:UK members are trained to not impose their own views and instead try to chair an open debate among students, providing occasional information or clarification. This allows questions to be asked and misconceptions to be tackled by the students themselves. With so many different imposing influences within

society it is crucial that young people are given the freedom to form their own opinions, in a constructive and relaxed environment.

Sexpression:UK is now a hugely successful charity with a network of 30 branch centres at universities across the UK, from Aberdeen to Plymouth. What began as an idealistic ambition has become the largest student-led sexual health organisation, with over 1,500 members and an official board of trustees. The network is also an affiliate of the global health organisation, [Medsin-UK](#). This gives it more presence and standing within the medical world.

Sexpression:UK faces a number of challenges which we tackle through comprehensive training for all members. The nature of Sexpression:UK's work means we often deal with highly sensitive and difficult issues, such as child abuse. Therefore, all Sexpression:UK members receiving training in child protection and safeguarding and are encouraged to seek advice from the national committee or board of trustees if needed. At the beginning of each session members lay out ground rules, such as to not use personal stories and to use only anatomical words. These boundaries make clear that the lesson is not the place for personal experiences to be shared, as we are not trained to offer specific counselling or advice.

Sexpression:UK members can access a database of class lessons on a huge range of topics from body size to sexual consent. This database, created by members of the national committee, contains detailed session plans and advice on how to deliver the session, with an aim to support local branches and create a national standard for Sexpression:UK sessions. Each branch communicates closely with the schools and youth clubs on the topics they plan to cover.

As volunteers, members of Sexpression:UK are hugely passionate and dedicated people who give up their spare time from university studies. Many volunteer because they remember the lack of adequate SRE during their own time at school. There are few organisations who provide the opportunity to have such a valuable and long-lasting impact on young people from a diverse range of backgrounds. There is always a huge amount of optimism and enthusiasm at the national Sexpression:UK meetings and conferences that take place throughout the year.

Members describe a real sense that they are making a concrete and tangible impact on young people's lives.

The need for LGBT+ specific sex and relationship teaching

Gender identity and sexuality are an important focus of Sexpression:UK's work. It is during adolescence that young people begin to define themselves, and it is therefore crucial that young people are given open and non-judgemental teaching on these issues. There is clear evidence that 16-25 year olds who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex and/or asexual, referred to in this article as LGBT+, have higher incidence rates of sexually transmitted infections such as HIV (Public Health England, 2014), worse mental health outcomes (Youth Chances, 2014) and experience high levels of physical, sexual and emotional abuse (Stonewall, 2012). LGBT+ specific teaching is therefore critical in order to not only provide LGBT+ pupils with a better understanding of their sexuality and sexual health but also to reduce stigma more widely (Stonewall, 2015). This notion is supported by a wide range of evidence (PSHE Association, 2015) as well as by national sexual health charities, ministers, teachers, parents and young people themselves.

We will now discuss two examples of sessions which explore LGBT+ issues from the York and Brighton Sexpression:UK branches.

Respecting trans*¹ people: a case study from Sexpression York

The first lesson plan that the York branch of Sexpression:UK ever delivered in schools included a video of LGBT+ people talking about their sexuality or gender. In one lesson, a student asked incredulously: "so, all those people were gay?" He looked scandalised. "Even the black man? I have never, ever heard of a gay black man."

This is an extreme example of the clear need for LGBT+-specific learning. Students' dearth of knowledge is particularly evident when discussing trans* issues, which is why we developed a lesson entitled "LGBT+ Identities", in consultation with transgender activist Ashley Reed.

1. What does the asterisk in Trans* stand for? <http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/05/what-does-the-asterisk-in-trans-stand-for/>

In this lesson, ground rules are essential. From the beginning we make clear that there must be: “no talking about the sexual orientation or gender of anybody in the room, unless somebody wants to share about themselves”, and “act as if there are LGBT+ people present - there probably are! - by talking in a way that would respect them and not hurt their feelings”.

We proceed with an ice-breaker activity, followed by a game involving cards to explain the difference between sex and gender. One of these games is a card-sorting activity called “Respect or Bullying?” Students sort cards into two piles; one for respectful words e.g. “asexual”, “intersex”, “gay”, and “transgender”, and one for words used to (sometimes inadvertently) bully e.g. “tr***y”, “it”, “fa**ot”, “sh*male”. This is a chance for facilitators to clarify definitions without it seeming like a vocabulary exercise, and provides a judgement-free zone where students can realise through discussion that words they might have used in the past can be hurtful.

At the end of the lesson, we show the students a video, followed by group discussion. The video follows Jazz Jennings, a transgender teenager. The emotional effect on students is always obvious. This first-hand account of the effect that being transgender has on her life - both the good and the profoundly painful - can turn a lively, giggly classroom into a solemn, thoughtful one.

The session aims to avoid the “sex change” issue, which is so dominant in the media, and instead focuses on fostering understanding and acceptance of trans* people. We therefore only touch on transitioning² briefly, after the video about Jazz, by asking “why might a transgender person decide not to transition?” Framing the issue in this way lets us acknowledge transition as a choice only some trans* people make, and encourages pupils to reflect on barriers preventing trans* people from expressing their gender. We emphasise to young people that gender is valid with or without medical transition, and discourage in-depth discussion of trans* people’s genitals, which is unhelpful at best and objectifying at worst.

The impact of the session is reflected in the anonymous questions we encourage students to submit. These are answered by Sexpression:UK York volunteers at the end of the session in front

of the whole group. Examples include; “Can you stop feeling in the wrong body?”; “Do you think we have too many labels?”; and “What percentage of people are killed because they are LGBT?” One student used the feedback form to tell us what they learned in the session. They summarised the exact take-home message we want to send, with compassion and simplicity: “Do not treat transgender people as if they don’t fit.”

What is female? : a case study from Sexpression Brighton in collaboration with Allsorts LGBT youth project

The Brighton branch of Sexpression:UK collaborate with Allsorts Youth Project (Allsorts Youth Project, 2015), a Brighton based project that works specifically with young LGBT+ people. Brighton Sexpression facilitates sessions for Allsorts members aged 16-25 years. Both organisations are committed to empowering young people to challenge sexual prejudice and discrimination.

Each session is centred on a core topic, for example; contraception, puberty, sexuality or gender identity. A particularly memorable session focussed on gender identity and expression. Though the session was open to any young LGBT+, we suggested that those who identify as female might be particularly interested as the focus of the session was ‘What is female?’

All sessions at Allsorts begin in the same way as other Sexpression:UK sessions by setting out ground rules. Each member of the group then introduces his or herself and states their pronoun; whether they’d like to be referred to as ‘he’, ‘she’ or gender neutral ‘they’. For many of the Allsorts students, their preferred pronoun is not fixed and is chosen depending on how they feel at that particular moment. This approach aims to create a safe, inclusive environment and encourages participants to express themselves freely.

We then explored the title of the session; ‘What is female?’ This question promoted passionate discussion during which participants recalled difficult conversations with family members and friends surrounding their gender identity and/or sexuality. Others shared sources of information and personal coping strategies for tackling

difficult or uncomfortable situations.

During the sessions many of the young people discussed how they felt LGBT+ issues were ignored during sex education in schools. Participants raised important questions around safe sex: one trans-girl asked if there was a chance she could get her girlfriend pregnant while she was taking female sex hormones. Another participant wanted to know what oestrogen was and whether it's safe to buy it over the Internet. These are not hypothetical questions but real life concerns facing LGBT+ young people.

Students from Allsorts described how they do not feel they can ask these complicated and intimate questions at school, particularly as sex education predominantly focuses on heterosexual relationships. Many resort to the Internet for answers, running the risk of encountering unreliable, incorrect and harmful information. The sessions delivered by Sexpression:UK provide an opportunity to informally ask questions to near-peer university students, who can provide objective and non-judgemental information.

Feedback from the participants and from the staff at Allsorts has been hugely positive. The Allsorts students told us they often felt uncomfortable and uninterested during sex education teaching at school. They enjoy these sessions because they cover topics LGBT+ young people can personally relate to. The Allsorts staff note that the young people raised important issues during the sessions that they had not heard them discuss before. As members of Sexpression:UK we find these sessions equally rewarding; it is a privilege to work with such insightful students and humbling to hear the day-to-day challenges of young LGBT+ people.

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