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## 'They Think You Shouldn't be Having Sex Anyway': Young People's Suggestions for Improving Sexuality Education Content

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**Abstract** It has been recognized that to be effective, sexuality education must meet the needs and interests of young people (Aggleton and Campbell, 2000). However, this acknowledgement has often manifested in adults ultimately determining what young people's needs and interests are. This article focuses on what senior school students determine as important and relevant programme content from focus group and survey data. Participants' suggestions provide a critique of current sexuality education provision that is clinical, de-erotized and didactic. Young people's calls for content about emotions in relationships, teenage parenthood, abortion and how to make sexual activity pleasurable offer insights into how they understand themselves as sexual subjects. Student responses position them as having the right to make their own decisions about sexual activity and to access knowledge that will enable their engagement in relationships that are physically and emotionally pleasurable. This positioning sits in conflict with the preferred non-sexual identity young people are offered by the official culture of many schools (Allen, 2007). It is proposed that this tension has implications for how programmes constitute student sexuality and their effectiveness in empowering young people to view their sexuality positively and make positive sexual decisions.

**Keywords** curriculum content, sexual subjectivities, heteronormativity, sexuality education, young people

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## 'They Think You Shouldn't be Having Sex Anyway': Young People's Suggestions for Improving Sexuality Education Content

Since the inception of sex education in New Zealand schools,<sup>1</sup> what should constitute programme content has been a highly controversial

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issue. Sexuality education<sup>2</sup> is a site of competing political interests comprising parents/caregivers, teachers, school management, educational policy makers, civil liberties organizations, conservative and liberal groups. This subject serves as a vehicle for addressing a plethora of social, economic and moral issues, a role that shapes what is considered appropriate curriculum content (Sears, 1992; Thomson, 1994). What is deemed 'suitable' for students to know is always a product of a particular historical moment and the social and economic forces which frame this context. Typically, it has been adults (at the level of policy and classroom pedagogy) who have determined 'acceptable' and 'useful' content. This phenomenon persists despite increased public discourse about how sexuality education must meet young people's needs and interests to be effective (Aggleton and Campbell, 2000). Often this is manifested as adults' perceptions of young people's needs and interests rather than these being determined by young people themselves. Launched from a student centred perspective, this article examines what 16–19-year-olds deem relevant for senior-level sexuality education drawing on questionnaire and focus group data. From this analysis young people's critique of sexuality education emerges in a way that positions them as *sexual subjects* who are legitimately sexual, instead of preferably non-sexual.

There are several reasons why it might be important that young people determine sexuality education content. Sexuality education that addresses what young people define as relevant is more likely to engage students with its messages. Programmes that fail to acknowledge young people's lived realities are less likely to capture their attention. The notion that young people are incapable of knowing what they need because they lack life experience, may be an unhelpful justification for adult determined content. This thinking positions young people as lacking the kind of agency and decision-making power necessary to experience their sexuality positively. If young people are never truly believed to possess these capacities, how can sexuality education aimed at responsible sexual decision making be expected to work? Recognizing young people as good judges of what content they need, positions them with the agency necessary to make positive sexual decisions.

This article proposes that there is a tension between some adult-conceived directives for sexuality education and young people's sense of what constitutes important content. Participants critiqued what Sears conceptualizes as the techno-rational approach to sexuality education. This perspective prioritizes rational decision making and focuses on the technical/physiological aspects of sexuality such as prevention of sexually transmissible infections and unplanned pregnancy (Sears, 1992). Such critique was evidenced in questionnaire responses that called for content about emotions in relationships, teenage parenthood, abortion and how

to make sexual activity pleasurable for both partners. Young people's suggestions positioned them as sexual subjects with the right to sexual knowledge that will support their engagement in relationships that are physically and emotionally pleasurable. This positioning sits in conflict with the preferred non-sexual identity offered to young people in much sexuality education and by official school culture (Allen, 2007). Participants also identified a deficit in programmes where the underpinning philosophy is to prevent teenage parenthood, abortion and sexually transmissible infections while ignoring how to support young people through these. By asserting they want to know about such issues participants indicate they are options they may actively choose, communicating a sense of agency about their own life decisions. When participants render reproduction, puberty and menstruation unnecessary topics at senior level they are constituted as knowledgeable about sexuality's basics. The dismissal of these topics, positions them as more sophisticated embodied sexual subjects concerned with corporeal logistics (e.g. how to make sexual activity pleasurable for both partners) and emotions in relationships (e.g. dealing with relationship break ups).

These arguments are drawn out in discussion that commences with an analysis of sexuality issues participants wanted programmes to include and why these were identified as important. An examination of topics young people specified as unnecessary at senior level and justifications for these omissions is also undertaken.

The article treats young people's written and spoken narratives as discourses which offer insights about how they understand themselves as sexual beings. For feminist poststructuralists, discourses are 'socially organized frameworks of meaning that define categories and specify domains of what can be said and done (Burman, 1994). Discourses not only structure the ways we can think about things but they also constitute our subjectivity, or our understanding of ourselves in relation to others and the world (Weedon, 1987). As discourses are socially organized frameworks of meaning they offer competing and often contradictory possibilities for forming personal identity (Edley and Wetherell, 1997; Gavey, 1989). The discourses young people draw upon in response to questions about sexuality education are analysed for the ways they position young people as sexual subjects. When discourses are seen to specify domains of what can be said and done they have ramifications for what can be thought about student sexuality and how this is enacted. It is this point that has implications for sexuality education's conceptualization and delivery. If young people's sense of themselves as sexual conflicts with schools' positioning of student sexuality, then programme effectiveness may be affected.

## Details of the study

Analysis is based on 10 focus groups and 1180 completed surveys with young people aged 16–19 in New Zealand.<sup>3</sup> This age group captures a diverse sector of the youth population who may either have left school or be in the last two years of secondary education. The 78 focus group participants were recruited from 5 schools in a major North Island city and one community initiative to support gay, lesbian and bisexual youth. Schools were drawn from a range of socio-economic and urban/rural locations with two schools designated a decile 10 rating by the Ministry of Education, two a decile 4 and one decile 1 school. Decile rankings indicate the extent to which a school draws its students from low socio-economic communities with decile 1 schools containing the highest proportion of these students and decile 10 the lowest (Ministry of Education, 2003). Accessing gay, lesbian and bisexual students in school settings can be problematic given these institutions are heteronormative spaces (Hillier and Rosenthal, 2001). Warner (1993) describes heteronormativity as an organizing principal of social life which presumes desire, sexual practice and identity are universally heterosexual (Warner, 1993: xxi–xxiv). Heteronormativity permeates schools through structures and processes which normalize heterosexuality, while simultaneously casting homosexuality as ‘abnormal other’. To ensure the inclusion of gay, lesbian and bisexual students, two focus groups with attendees at a community support group for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and Takataapui<sup>4</sup> youth were conducted. All focus groups were mixed gender (a composition chosen by participants), ranging from 3 to 14 volunteers who were often friends. The researcher facilitated all sessions, which lasted between one and one and a half hours either in an unused classroom or in a facility owned by the community group.

Focus groups were conducted in two parts with participants first answering general questions about sexuality education. These involved describing a ‘best sexuality lesson’ or discussing the most useful things learned. To draw out more detail about content preferences a continuum activity was undertaken. Participants were asked to debate the placement of 32 possible sexuality topics written on cards, into four piles headed: Good Quality Coverage, Average Quality Coverage, Poor Coverage and Not Taught. Topics were based on previous research findings concerning young people and sexuality (Allen, 2005) and policy recommendations for programme content (see Appendix). To determine content relevant to their current experience, participants then sorted the same topics into the categories ‘Should be Taught to Senior School Students’ and ‘Not Relevant for Senior School Students’. Discussion generated from these activities forms the basis of data examined.

As focus groups are more likely to produce group knowledge and norms (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999) an anonymous questionnaire was employed to complement these data. This method enabled participants to provide information individually and anonymously so issues or perspectives they did not wish to air in a group could emerge. Fifteen schools, located throughout New Zealand, participated in the questionnaire distribution. As with focus group schools, these represented a range of decile ratings and urban/rural locations. Two schools comprised private fee-paying students while another two were faith-based. Three schools were single sex (two girls' schools and one boys' school) with initial contact made through health teachers who facilitated access to pupils through the principal. In most cases the questionnaire was distributed by the author, unless congested timetabling or geographical location caused access difficulties (in such instances health teachers undertook this role). The questionnaire was designed to ascertain what participants felt sexuality education had done well, and how they would like future programmes to address their needs and interests. Responses to one closed ended question are analysed here with other elements of the data explored in depth elsewhere (see Allen, 2006; 2007). This question asked participants which topics from a possible 30 they wanted to know more about. Issues closely resembled those provided in the focus group activity (see Appendix).

Qualitative data were analysed by grouping emergent themes across focus group discussions. Talk about frequently mentioned issues like sexual diversity, emotions in relationships and abortion were then categorized under appropriate headings. Narratives were subsequently read for similarities and disparities in the framing of issues both across and within focus groups. These narratives were further discursively analysed for the way they positioned young people as sexual subjects (Willig, 1999). Extracts quoted throughout this article are indicative of trends in focus group talk and are selected as examples of the clearest articulation of a point made generally. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS with T-tests undertaken to establish gender differences. Significant gender differences ( $p = 0.05$ ) form the focus of another article about this research (Allen, 2006). Survey responses were also treated as discursive texts which when selected by participants positioned them as sexual subjects in particular ways. For instance, ticking the option 'how to make sexual activity enjoyable for both partners', can discursively position a participant as an 'active sexual subject' who might legitimately engage in sexual activity and expect to give and receive sexual pleasure. These discursive positionings are drawn out as part of the ensuing data analysis and their ramifications for sexuality education design and delivery discussed.

## Topics students wanted to know more about

### *How to make sexual activity more enjoyable for both partners*

The above topic was selected by the greatest number of survey participants (56%) as something they wanted to know more about. Focus group participants identified talk about 'pleasure' as missing in school sexuality education. Young people demonstrated an awareness that official discourses of sexuality education were dominated by a biological and risk management approach which denied pleasure as important or mentionable. The following discussion between young people in a community focus group indicates this deficit and its consequences for young people's experiences of sexuality.

Rosemary: . . . you do get a couple of teachers who say well, you know sex is supposed to be fun but it's not always and you shouldn't be having it anyway [*all laugh*].

Aleisha: It's supposed to be after you're married.

Rosemary: Yeah.

Louisa: So what would you have wanted to know about pleasure and desire?

Paul: That it's an okay thing, that everyone experiences it.

Rosemary: Yeah.

Paul: And there are ways to get it.

Louisa: And you want to know the ways?

Paul: Well . . .

Rosemary: They should actually mention the word orgasm at least once.

David: Yeah.

Rosemary: Because they don't . . . I, this is weird, I don't actually, and this is truthfully, I'd never heard of the word orgasm until I was like fourteen . . .

Aleisha: Me neither.

Rosemary: . . . I didn't even know what one was. No one told me that there was a pleasurable side to this that you could actually do this . . .

Aleisha: Yeah I heard about your boyfriend blah, blah, blah orgasm . . .

Rosemary: Or the internet, I found out on the internet on a, on a . . .

David: Oh yeah, I find out about everything on the internet . . . the internet, what would we do without it.

Rosemary: You know you never get told about it.

Paul: Yeah it's stating basic human wants and needs.

Louisa: And what do you want to know about pleasure?

Rosemary: It's not a bad thing, telling you that pleasure's not a bad thing.

Paul: Yeah, exactly.

(Community focus group, ages 16–19)

Participants indicated 'pleasure' was an absence in their sexuality education or only mentioned and subsequently legitimated with reference to marriage. If acknowledged, pleasure was cast as 'something bad' a characterization dating back to early Christianity where sex was equated with sin (Hawkes, 2004). For Rosemary this deficit resulted in not knowing what an 'orgasm' (a term she conflated with sexual pleasure) was until she was fourteen. While a lack of positive references to 'pleasure' were reported across focus groups, their obscurity was intensified for this group because they identified as gay and lesbian. When Aleisha did hear the word orgasm it was with reference to 'boyfriends' making this difficult to equate with lesbian experience. Positive references to pleasure are scarcer at school for same-sex attracted youth. Same-sex attracted students are already cast as 'deviant' and therefore invisible within schooling cultures, making the possibility of their sexual pleasure even more unfathomable in this context (Hillier et al., 2005).

The importance young people placed on knowing about sexual pleasure is glimpsed in the above discussion. When this information was not obtained at school or presented in a way that failed to reflect participants' sense of lived reality, they were motivated to seek it elsewhere. In the above case, Rosemary and David turned to the internet. According to Hillier et al., (2001) this can be a valuable source of support for youth who are denied information from more conventional avenues. Two-thirds of same-sex attracted youth in Hillier et al.'s (2001) Australian study specified the net as an 'important' or 'very important' source of sexuality information. Similarly, research in New Zealand indicates that heterosexual youth (particularly young men) are increasingly using the internet to locate information about sex and sexuality (Allen, 2001). Seeking information about sexual pleasure beyond school, reveals young people's sense of its importance in their lives.

Details of what young people wanted to know about sexual activity and pleasure emerged in focus groups. Not all focus groups talked about pleasure candidly. Some references were more implicit or nuanced, conveyed through humour or innuendo. These conversations may have been difficult because of the social perception that young people should preferably be non-sexual (Monk, 2001; Silin, 1995) and the fact that

talking about pleasure can expose intimate details about the sexual self. As these inhibitions were more apparent in the institutionalized setting of schooling, the most candid and articulate discussions occurred in community focus groups. These participants expressed a need for schools to acknowledge that sexual activity could be pleasurable and indicate how pleasure could be attained.

Louisa: Okay, pleasure and desire, what do you want to be taught about in terms of pleasure and desire?

Rosemary: That it can be pleasurable . . .

David: Yeah.

Rosemary: . . . and that it's not just, you know, reproductive . . .

Aleisha: Like where everything is that you can get pleasure from.

Rosemary: Yeah.

Louisa: You mean like on your body?

Rosemary: Yeah, oh definitely.

Aleisha: Like the g zone stuff.

Paul: Yeah, and maybe if like someone talked about it like they've actually done it, instead of talking about it like its some kind of scientific thing that they . . .

Aleisha: Yeah.

Paul: You look at them and you wonder if they've ever done it you know like but if you hear people talking about 'I do this blah, blah, blah' like you know, snap on a video like of just some normal person talking about it that . . .

David: I mean who ever knew the neck could be so, such nice stuff.

Aleisha: And the ears . . .

David: Oh the ears [*to Aleisha*] I told you about that aye [*pause*] god [*said as if in raptures*].

Aleisha: Yeah, ears.

(Community focus group, ages 16–19)

Participants criticize sexuality education which presents sexual activity 'like its some kind of scientific thing' for being de-eroticized and disembodied. Their calls to include 'real' experiences of pleasure seek to embody sexuality education in a way that programmes which favour a technical and risk management approach negate. These participants assert that they desire knowledge about how bodies might engender

pleasure as when Aleisha says she'd like to know, 'where everything is that you can get pleasure from'. David also infers his own experience of embodied sexual pleasure when checking he told Aleisha how he'd discovered 'ears and necks' as highly pleasurable. This talk positions young people as embodied sexual subjects. Desiring to know how sexual pleasure is achieved invokes a sexual and embodied self that casts sexual activity and a right to experience sexual pleasure as legitimate pursuits for young people.

This positioning stands in stark contrast to how some teachers in the research perceived young people's sexuality. As a means of reciprocating information shared by participants with the researcher, reports of research findings were individually prepared for schools. These comprised analysis of data intended to help health teachers to design and deliver future sexuality programmes. Teachers' reactions to the first place ranking of 'how to make sexual activity more enjoyable for both partners' conveyed their perceptions of student sexuality. A common response was, 'I'm sure they do want to know more about that', in a tone implying this request could not be taken seriously. Young people's interest in this information was sometimes judged inappropriate (in some cases insolent) and too controversial for proper consideration. These responses positioned young people as preferably non-sexual, without entitlement to information about how to make sexual activity pleasurable. Monk (2001) explains that this attitude echoes a dominant social discourse which 'upholds the "impossibility" of child sexuality<sup>5</sup>. . . [that] reflects not so much the needs of young people, but rather, the sensitivities and anxieties of adults' (Monk, 2001: 279). The implication that interest in sexual pleasure was mischievous and therefore inappropriate, positions young people as unable to be taken seriously and not trustworthy to determine their own needs and interests. This constitution of student sexual identity sits in tension with participants' presentation of self as legitimately sexual and interested in achieving positive sexual experiences.

### *Abortion and teenage parenthood*

Two other issues, which appeared in the top five topics that participants wanted to know more about were abortion (ranked second, with 54% of participants ticking this option) and teenage parenthood (ranked fourth, 51% named this). When talking about abortion participants described this topic as rarely mentioned in sexuality education. Some received information in other subjects like biology or religious education but generally there was dissatisfaction with this coverage. A main criticism was the biased nature of material, where the prevailing message was that abortion was morally wrong and should never have to be contemplated. As the following young women reveal, the 'evil' of abortion was often portrayed

as an inevitable and direct outcome of sexual intercourse being ‘wrong’ for young people.

- Louisa: What kinds of messages did you get around abortion?
- Chelsea: It’s bad and evil and don’t do it.
- Kylie: Yeah negatives, so don’t get into the position where you have to do something like that.
- Ruth: Yeah, don’t have sex so you don’t have to have an abortion and kill your baby and all the rest of it.  
(Decile 10, private, co-educational school, ages 16–17)

A participant in another focus group indicated that her class had watched an anti-abortion video showing this procedure. The film had left such an impression that she could still recall its title, ‘The Silent Scream’. Some resentment was detectable in participants’ accounts of being denied or given partial information about abortion. One-sided approaches were sometimes interpreted as denying young people the right to choose how they felt about this issue. Aleisha explained this feeling when she said

It’s bad. That’s what we got told, abortion is bad. We don’t get the [*pause*], the only time I ever heard it was good was that teacher Miss Kelly that I told you about who was really open, well she was telling us about when she was 20 and she got pregnant [*pause*] and she had an abortion and that was the only time I ever heard about anyone having a choice and actually the choice being there. (18 years, community focus group)

The importance of being recognized by school as able to make their own decisions about abortion, appeared to underpin participants’ suggestions for how this subject might be incorporated in the curriculum.

This sentiment was succinctly captured by Cindy who explained sexuality education should include, ‘what options you have if you like, if you want to have an abortion and stuff like that, what you can do and how to deal with it’ (16 years, Decile 1, co-educational school). Another participant indicated that, ‘we don’t know any of the technical stuff we just know like that it’s bad, that’s about it and they just tell you not to do it’ (Timara, 16 years, Decile 10, private, co-educational). Participants also noted it would be helpful to receive information about where to go for an abortion, details about the procedure like its length, ‘or even just where to seek the information, where you start’, (Chelsea, 16 years, Decile 10, private, co-educational). Non-biased information and an opportunity to hear a diversity of abortion perspectives was also requested. This approach was deemed optimal because, ‘you can sit there and think about your own [opinions] rather than just having this one

opinion going blah, blah, blah' (Karen, 16 years, Decile 10, private, co-educational). These suggestions communicate young people's desire for more comprehensive coverage of this topic and acknowledgement that they have a right to make their own decisions about abortion. This view is supported by New Zealand law where a person under 16 does not need parental consent for a legal abortion (section 25A the Guardianship Act 1968 – amended in 1977).

Young people wanted to know more about teenage parenthood for similar reasons to seeking information about abortion. Sexuality education was thought to lack support and information for those who become teenage parents, instead giving priority to preventing this outcome. In the following discussion, participants identify the underpinning philosophy of much sexuality education, which is prevention of 'negative' outcomes of sexual activity.

Haley: . . . with teenage parenthood they say this is how to avoid it, but once you're in the situation there's nothing. It's like, all right you are a 'no hoper' now.

Sandra: They don't even give you anywhere to go, like if you get into this situation you can go here and talk to these people and . . .

Heidi: . . . people will help you and give you information like if you do become pregnant then there's special schools that you can go to where you can still get your education.

Haley: Yeah and abortion stuff.  
(Decile 10, co-educational school, 16–17 years)

Haley detects what can be an underlying message of prevention-focused programmes where those who fail to heed its warnings are cast as 'no-hopers'. Recognition of this intimation surfaced in other focus groups when Rosemary remarked that in sexuality education, 'I reckon you get told that teenage girls are bad and sluts, having their babies and stuff' (18 years, community focus group). This positioning can be disempowering for those who become teenage parents, offering a negative sense of self. These kinds of message, which render teen parents as 'irresponsible' and 'problems', also contribute to the social stigmatization of this group.

Denying young people information about being a teenage parent and what support is available fails to recognize the reality of their lives. This reality is that some will become teenage parents and will engage in sexual activity for this purpose. Examining the way in which teenage pregnancy is discursively constituted in New Zealand, Cherrington and Breheny explain how a sense of young people's agency and choice is missing from such constructions:

The absence of any recognition of the possibility of agency or choice in teenage pregnancy, coupled with constructions of young people 'at risk', bring a subtle inflection of legitimized adult (parental) authority to any interventionist stance. These young people are being positioned as needing (adult-authoritative) protection, either from their own unconsidered actions or what is acting on them. (Cherrington and Breheny, 2005: 97)

Sexuality education, as 'an adult/authoritative, interventionist stance', can perpetuate these dominant discourses of teenage pregnancy by only offering negative portrayals of teenage parenthood. Highlighting the challenges of this situation serves as a strategy to dissuade young people from engaging in unprotected sex. Some participants recognized this negative emphasis and endeavoured to counteract these messages. The conversation relayed earlier between Haley and Heidi reveals that participants wanted to know how to cope with teenage parenthood, what support is available and that this situation holds more hope than an end to their lives. Heidi alludes to this sense of hope and positive self-identity for pregnant teens when she offers that, 'there's special schools that you can go to where you can still get your education'. Like their proposals for including abortion in sexuality education, participants sought more positive information about teenage parenthood which subsequently offered them a measure of 'choice'.

Through their assertions for more, and positive information about abortion and teenage pregnancy, participants are constituted as subjects with agency. This positioning implies a right to comprehensive information, so they might be self-determining in these matters. This constitution of self provides more agency than subject positions offered by sexuality education, where prevailing discourses proclaim abortion 'wrong' and teenage pregnancy 'a problem' to be solved. The protective and risk management approach of such programmes offers young people limited and negative understandings of themselves as sexual subjects, which may not register with their own sense of self and entitlement. This lack of congruence may contribute to young people's disengagement from sexuality education. Limiting young people's choices through partial information may also appear didactic rather than empowering. Being told what to do and think about abortion and teenage pregnancy infantilizes young people wishing to develop a sense of autonomous identity. Such positioning may also be counterproductive to fostering young people's ability to make positive sexual decisions and view themselves positively.

### *Emotions in relationships and breaking up*

'Dealing with relationship break ups' (54% of participants named this) and the issue of 'emotions in relationships' (51%) were ranked third and fifth as topics participants most wanted to know more about. Disparities

existed between focus groups over whether relationships and emotions had been covered in sexuality education. Some participants indicated these elements had been addressed, while others described this content as missing. Programme diversity may account for this situation where some schools value emotional elements of student sexuality and others sideline them for issues like sexually transmissible infections and unplanned pregnancy. Since the 1970s, sexuality education has been criticized for equating young people's sexual health with being disease free, rather than taking a more holistic approach to this subject (David, 1978; Diorio, 1985). Despite this criticism, young Australian, New Zealand and English research participants continue to complain about the lack of attention to emotional issues in sexuality programmes (Allen, 2005; Forrest et al., 2004; Gilbert, 2004; Measor et al., 2000)

Even when sexuality education included information on relationships and emotions participants often appeared dissatisfied with this coverage. Some felt emotions and relationships were addressed within a moral discourse where sexual activity was permitted and fulfilling only when 'love' was part of a relationship. Participants viewed this linking of sexual activity and emotions as offering the following prescription; 'I think we are almost taught that sex is love, like, 'cause they always go on about do it with a special person that you really love and all that sort of stuff' (Ruth, 16 years, private, co-educational school). In another focus group of community participants this approach to student sexuality and emotions in relationships was talked about in more depth.

Louisa: How come you placed relationships and emotions in the 'poor coverage' pile?

Claire: Oh they never went into it in our school, that's what I was thinking they don't actually teach you like how to have a good relationship and [*pause*] how to relate to people and stuff.

Jessica: But what we get told is that there are relationships and people get married when they have them.

Andrew: Yeah [*laugh*] and emotions like . . . love is the ultimate thing and you can only do that once you get married.

Jessica: Yeah and like the relations thing isn't really there for like straight kids either like, they don't teach anyone how to relate to the opposite sex at all or anything like that.

(Community focus group, ages 16–18)

This discussion demonstrates the diversity in young people's experience of learning about emotions and relationships, with Claire missing out on this information while Jessica and Andrew received it. Andrew and Jessica critique this coverage for being narrowly confined to heterosexuality and

marriage, and morally imbued with an insistence on love as a prerequisite to sex. Within this discourse marriage is presented as the only sanctified relationship ('we get told there are relationships and people get married') in which love as 'the ultimate thing' makes sex respectable. As marriage is conventionally equated with heterosexuality, this message invisibilizes gay and lesbian identity and an exploration of emotions in same-sex relationships. Also implied is that if heterosexual marriage is where love occurs, then this emotional experience (and the sexual union it legitimates) are not possibilities for gay and lesbian students. These negative messages may contribute to a sense of isolation which some gay and lesbian youth report experiencing at school (Hillier et al., 2005).

What young people wanted to know about emotions and relationships was as Claire suggests, 'How to have a good relationship and how to relate to people'. Other participants mentioned the importance of how to handle specific emotional issues such as ending a relationship. In the following discussion participants reveal how learning skills to manage this situation were perceived as highly beneficial.

Timara: They don't really tell you that much about relationships; about like how to deal with breaking up with someone or anything like that.

Sinita: Yeah I know.

Timara: The talk like you get with your friends and family and magazines . . .

Chelsea: Yeah.

Louisa: Would that be useful information for senior school students?

Timara: Yeah.

Chelsea: Yeah it would.

Sinita: It affects so many people.

Cindy: They just go on and on in this relationship because they don't know how like to dump the person . . .

Chelsea: And they are scared like if they break up 'cause like quite often you'll have a relationship where you still want to be friends with them but like you don't know how to go about doing that.

(Private, co-educational school, 16–17 years)

In asserting an interest in knowing about emotions in relationships and how to cope when one ends, young people appear to contradict some common assumptions. These are beliefs that youth engage in relationships simply to experiment sexually and that they are emotionally immature and selfish. Instead, through their talk, participants are constituted as also invested in the emotional aspects of relationships and how best to manage

these. These findings corroborate other research indicating young people's relationships are not uniformly fleeting and devoid of emotional investment (Morris and Fuller, 1999; Allen, 2004).

*Topics students did not want to know more about*

Issues which ranked lowest in the list of those that participants wanted to know more about cohered around the technical and clinical aspects of sexuality, such as 'reproduction', 'periods' and 'puberty'. Focus group discussions implied these topics were considered redundant for senior school students for whom puberty and first periods were a thing of the past. Participants presented themselves as faced with a different set of concerns such as, entering longer term relationships and engaging in sexual activity which necessitated other skills and knowledge. Participants' sense of the redundancy of these topics also related to this material having already been comprehensively covered. Prior to electing what topics they wanted to know more about, the survey asked them to rate how well each of the same topics had been covered at school. The top five topics most students noted as being 'covered very well' were: sexually transmissible infections, puberty, reproduction, condoms and contraception as well as the effects of drugs and alcohol. As the following discussion demonstrates, schools' thorough coverage of these issues was also mentioned in focus groups.

Louisa: Uhm if you think about some of the things that sex education has covered really well, what sorts of things do you think you've learned really well from sex education so far?

Maya: STDs [sexually transmissible diseases].

Pita: Yep.

Maya: We get that hammered into us all the time.

Teresa: And drugs and don't smoke cigarettes and don't drink lots and all of that sort of stuff that doesn't sort of relate . . . [*trails off*].

Tess: One of the messages like they've done like the safe thing really well, I think like they always like say to have safe sex like all the time.

Teresa: Yeah.

Maya: Always know like, where to get like contraception from.  
(Decile 1, co-educational school, 17–18 years)

Maya's use of the phrase 'we get that hammered into us all the time' suggests students' perception of a topic being covered 'very well' may have been influenced by the frequency it was mentioned. Use of the word

'hammered' suggests the message was excessive and Teresa's comment that drugs, alcohol and cigarettes 'don't sort of relate' may indicate her feeling these were not necessarily relevant to sexuality education. Given the prevention focus of much sexuality education it may not be surprising that topics with a risk management focus were deemed no longer necessary at senior level.

By suggesting they know about core sexuality education topics (e.g. reproduction, puberty and STIs) participants are portrayed as sophisticated sexual subjects who are beyond the basics. This perception is reflected in research revealing that where schools offer comprehensive sexuality education, student knowledge in these areas is generally high (Allen, 2005). With these issues no longer deemed so important, they are positioned as having more mature and complex educational needs. This positioning sits in tension with schools that view students as requiring skills to protect them from negative outcomes of sexual activity, such as sexually transmissible infections (STIs). A struggle is apparent here over how participants and their schools understand student sexuality. Young people's requests for curriculum content position them legitimately as sexual subjects with the right to knowledge that will enable them to make autonomous sexual decisions and experience their sexuality in corporeally and emotionally pleasurable ways. Schools that deny young people the information they seek constitute them as preferably non-sexual, unable to make positive sexual decisions and in need of protection (largely from themselves).

### *Implications for the design of sexuality education*

One way to read young people's suggestions is as a critique of current sexuality education provision, which highlights issues perceived as inadequately covered. From this perspective young people's calls for information about how to make sexual activity more enjoyable imply content is currently too clinical and de-erotized. Similarly, interest in knowing more about emotions and relationships suggests some programmes offer a technical and emotionally remote education that does not satisfy students' interests in these aspects of intimacy. Requests for less morally steeped and more comprehensive coverage of issues like abortion and teenage parenthood reveal that young people are critical of partial and didactic information. Proposals to include these issues imply that if schools are to support young people's sexual health as determined by them, they will need to critically engage with public controversies surrounding abortion and teenage parenthood.

The critique participants make of sexuality education and the issues they identify as wanting to know more about, have implications for how programmes constitute student sexuality. Programmes which concentrate

on reducing sexually transmissible infections and unplanned pregnancy often harbour a preference that students do not engage in sexual activity, thereby constituting them as ideally non-sexual. However, young people's recommendations for content position them as legitimately sexual subjects, who have a right to experience and express their sexuality positively. In a bid to curb teenage pregnancy and abortion sexuality programmes can fail to represent these issues as options young people might rightfully choose. The student subject of these moral discourses is one whose power is limited to avoiding these 'predicaments' despite the fact that the age of consent to sexual intercourse in New Zealand is 16 years.<sup>6</sup> Senior school students of this age and over are therefore legally able to engage in this activity. The Contraception, Sterilization and Abortion Act (1977) also allows for young people under the age of 16 to be given contraceptive information, services and prescriptions (Crockett et al., 2002).

Participants' comments asserting their right to make their own decisions about sexuality issues imbues them with an agency that sexuality education can deny. Young people's requests also position them as mature enough to be given information about sexual pleasure. Programmes in which this information is missing constitute young people as preferably non-sexual, not entitled to pleasure and unready for this knowledge. When participants indicate they want to know about emotions and relationships they are constituted as subjects who are invested in more than sexual activity. Sexuality education's underlying preference for students to avoid sexual activity constitutes a student who is driven by sexual desires that need curbing. Young people's suggestions about programme content indicate they want to be understood differently from how some sexuality education programmes currently view them.

There may be important ramifications for sexuality education that dismisses content students deem important and persists in constituting their sexuality in ways that contradict their own understandings. As focus group discussion revealed, when participants did not receive the information they required or found it unsatisfactory they sought it in other places. While this may not necessarily lead to negative consequences, it increases the possibility that some sources consulted may not be reliable, positive or supportive. For example, while the internet can be an excellent source of valuable information, it also contains much misinformation and sites where young people's best interests are not a priority.

When sexuality education fails to take young people's content suggestions and perceptions of their own sexuality seriously it risks their disengagement from its messages. Content that does not address the questions and issues young people deem important may be dismissed as irrelevant and unhelpful. Ultimately this means that young people are unlikely to act on the knowledge and messages offered by sexuality

education. Such an approach can also encourage young people to feel their needs are not important and that schools are predominately concerned with securing their conformity, rather than empowering them to make positive decisions. This treatment of student sexuality is disempowering for those who feel they have a right to make their own decisions as young adults. Programmes which position young people in accordance with their own understandings of themselves as competent decision makers with a right to comprehensive information that will engender positive and pleasurable sexual experiences may be more likely to be effective. Constituting student sexuality in this way offers a positive sense of agency that is critical for making 'good' decisions about sexual activity.

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### ***Appendix: Sexuality Topics***

In the questionnaire, topics were set out under the following headings. During focus groups, topics were randomly ordered on cards without sub-headings.

#### **Puberty**

- Physical changes at puberty
- Periods (menstruation)

#### **Reproduction**

- Conception (process of how egg and sperm meet)
- Teenage parenthood
- Abortion
- Sterilization (Preventing pregnancy permanently, e.g. vasectomy for men)

#### **Sex and risk**

- Sexually transmitted infections
- Condom use and contraception
- Lower risk sexual activities (e.g. kissing)
- Effects of drugs and alcohol on sexual decision making
- Sexual harassment and abuse

#### **Sex and society**

- Homophobia (prejudice or discrimination against people who are gay or takataapui)

- Sexual diversity (gay, lesbian, bisexual identities)
- Transgendered people (people whose gender crosses 'traditional' boundaries e.g. cross dressers, transsexuals)
- Gender roles (what it means to be a woman/man in society)
- Pornography
- Prostitution
- How the media presents sex and sexuality
- Sex and the internet (net safety, cyber sex)
- Different cultural and religious beliefs around sexuality

### **Sex and the body**

- Positive body image (feeling good about your body)
- Sexuality and disability
- Masturbation (or wanking)
- What sexual activity is (i.e. what is sexual touch?)
- Technology and the body (i.e. fertility treatments like IVF, sex change operations)
- How you can tell if a female is turned on
- How you can tell if a male is turned on

### **Sex and relationships**

- Communicating with partners around sexual activity (e.g. saying 'yes'/saying 'no')
- How to make sexual activity enjoyable for both partners
- Abstinence (choosing not to have sex for the time being e.g. before marriage)
- Emotions in sexual relationships (e.g. love, lust, jealousy)
- Dealing with relationship break ups

### **Notes**

1. Sex education has been provided in a variety of forms by some schools since the late 1880s in New Zealand. Such education often comprised a lecture from an external organization, the distribution of literature and parent-child evenings (Smyth, 2000).
2. Sex education has undergone a formal name change to 'sexuality education' in New Zealand since the inception of the *Health and Physical Education Curriculum* (1999). It is stated in this curriculum that 'sex education, generally refers only to the physical dimension of sexuality education' while 'sexuality education' is believed to be a more holistic and inclusive term which covers all aspects of sexuality (Ministry of Education, 1999: 38).
3. The research received ethics approval from the University of Auckland Human Subjects Committee before project commencement. This approval stipulated that where schools were involved in the research the principals' written consent be obtained in addition to the consent of any participant.

4. In New Zealand the 'Maori Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender community have adopted this word to identify as being Maori and queer' (definition from the New Zealand AIDS Foundation, Takataapui pamphlet).
5. The use of 'child sexuality' here is not an exclusive reference to 'young children' but deliberately invokes the way *all* young people (regardless of age) can be imbued with 'childhood innocence'. This interpretation is drawn from the context of the quotation, which proceeds to refer to 'young people' rather than 'children'. The quotation is also located within a discussion of sex and relationships education content as delivered to older students.
6. This ruling pertains to heterosexual couples. The 1986 *Homosexual Law Reform Act* set the age of consent for male same-sex couples at 16 also. There are no specific laws relating to the legal age for sexual relations between women, however if one partner is over 21, and the other is under 16, the older partner can be charged with committing an indecent act (verbatim, Crockett et al., 2002: 49).

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