

Guest Editorial

Sexuality education in different contexts: limitations and possibilities

Venka Simovska & Ros Kane

Purpose

Sexuality education is a controversial and contested issue that has evoked wide debate on the question of its aims, contents, methods, pedagogy and desired outcomes. This editorial aims to provide a brief commentary, positioning the contributions to this special issue of *Health Education* within the research landscape concerning sexuality education in schools internationally.

Design/methodology/approach

The idea for this special issue was born in Odense, Denmark, in October 2012, during the 4th European Conference of Health Promoting Schools. The Conference Programme and the debates during the sessions demonstrated the need for a wider discussion of sexuality education, particularly within the framework of the health-promoting school. There was recognition of the need to endorse positive and wide socio-ecological views of health, including sexual health and a critical educational approach to sexuality education. The conference delegates and the members of the *Schools for Health in Europe Research Network* were invited to submit a paper for the special issue, and the invitation was also sent through other networks and research communities globally. The invitation resulted in papers being submitted beyond Europe and the special issue took an interesting global turn. This networking process also resulted in the identification of a number of key international subject-specific experts who took on the role of independent reviewers.

Findings

Following the review and editorial process six papers were accepted for the special issue. The articles highlight contrasts, tensions, potentials and barriers embedded in the ways sexual education is delivered to children and young people internationally. Examples are drawn from Russia, Wales, China and the United States; they identify historical and structural issues related to the successful implementation of comprehensive progressive approaches. Topics discussed include the importance of appropriate content, theoretical/conceptual frameworks, modes of delivery, timing, attitudes from key stakeholders and the need for comprehensive evaluation of innovative approaches to the delivery of sexual education.

Originality/value

The special issue provides a unique blend of evaluations of practical examples of pioneering programmes, research using quantitative and mixed method designs, and critical conceptual discussions related to sexuality education and factors that influence it. The special issue addresses sexuality education from a life course perspective; some of the individual papers focus on young children and some on lifelong learning. All the papers point to the importance of understanding structural, socio-historical, political and cultural factors influencing sexuality education.

The topic of school based sexuality education crosses the boundary between education and health and raises complex political issues between progressive social and health campaigners and moral traditionalists (Monk, 2001) and, as such is of relevance to a wide audience of academics, policy makers and educators. Indeed, there are few areas of the school curriculum that have generated as much consistent controversy as that of sexuality education (Corngold, 2013). It is often the focus of heated political debate (Lewis and Knijn, 2002) and media attention (Thompson and Blake, 2002; Kingori et al., 2004).

In general, the predominant rationale behind school based sexuality education globally derives from a traditional public health perspective focusing on preventing risk behaviours leading to sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies and sexual violence (UNESCO 2009; WHO & BZgA 2010). Whilst a vast amount of research has been carried out on the possible preventive effects of sexuality education (e.g. Apter 2011; Kirby & Coyle 1997), little attention has been paid to a positive perspective focusing on sexual wellbeing and/or critical health education including identity, diversity and human rights (Ingham & Hirst 2010; McNamara et al 2010; Hirst 2013). Against this backdrop, and with Giddens's (1992) discussion of the transformation of sexuality in modern societies in mind, this special issue of *Health Education* features articles that examine and discuss the contrasts, tensions, potentials and barriers embedded in the ways sexual education is delivered to children and young people internationally. The papers are written by scholars from Russia, Wales, China and the United States. Together, they epitomize a unique blend of evaluations of practical pioneering programmes, research using quantitative and mixed method designs, and critical conceptual discussions related to sexuality education and factors that influence it.

In the first article "*Introducing sexual education to Russian Schools: Effects of the Dance4Life programme on perceptions and behaviour of adolescents and teachers*", Alekseeva, Krasnopolskaya and Skokova report data from the empirical evaluation of the effectiveness of an intervention in Russia. "Dance4life" is an international programme that employs innovative methods of providing information on Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) to young people. The programme, which is delivered by volunteers, employs the "edutainment" model involving young people meaningfully through music, dance and the use of youth icons. It addresses taboos, stigma, discrimination, HIV/AIDS prevention whilst promoting sexual, reproductive health and rights and healthy lifestyles among adolescents. Their mixed methods study combines qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the effectiveness of the programme. Through focus groups, in-depth interviews and a structured questionnaire with key stakeholders including young people, they demonstrate how participation in 'dance4life' had a significant positive impact on perceptions of SRHR and knowledge levels; it changed some misconceptions about HIV/AIDS and helped develop social and healthy lifestyle skills. This study is unique in two ways. The intervention itself is the first of its kind in Russia, where there is no consistent school-based sexual education. Additionally where interventions are put in place they are rarely comprehensively evaluated.

Roberts, in the paper "*Tyfu i Fyny/Growing Up interactive bi-lingual resources to deliver Sex and Relationships Education for students aged 5 to 12 years*", reports another innovative approach from practice: the development of new interactive, Sex and Relationships Education resources which have been implemented in Wales. The author considers the evidence to inform the development of the resources, the support provided for teachers and parents and an initial evaluation following their use. The resources developed are interactive bi-lingual (Welsh and English) Sex and Relationships Education tools for primary schools suitable for students aged 5 to 12

years. The results from the initial evaluation demonstrate how the resources have impacted on the teaching and learning experiences of primary teachers and students and how the teacher training sessions and using the resources have increased teachers' confidence in delivering Sex and Relationships Education. The positive findings from the evaluation demonstrate how both improved teaching practice and increased teachers' confidence have facilitated the delivery of effective whole school comprehensive Sex and Relationships Education programmes for primary schools. These factors confirm the value of the investment given to the development of the resources. The author suggests that the resources could be easily customised to meet broader ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious needs.

In the paper "*Foundations of Life-long Sexual Health Literacy*" Graf and Patrick address the longer-term impact of sexual education delivered in adolescence as this may represent the only formal sexual information individuals ever receive. They used quantitative methods to try to gain an understanding of the extent to which early education is sufficient to promote lifelong sexual health literacy. Their study examines the influence of the timing and source of sexual education on current safe sex knowledge and risky sexual behaviours among middle-aged and older adults in the United States. Although some of their respondents reported receiving some formal sexual education post-adolescence, the majority (61.5%) received formal sexual education only in adolescence. Across the life span, friends were the most common source of sexual information. Participants reported engaging in an average of approximately 4 (out of 16) risky sexual behaviours across their lifetime. Those with formal sexuality education in adolescence demonstrated higher levels of knowledge on issues relating to safe sex but also engaged in more risky sex behaviours. This study is among the first to situate the normative, formal sexual education experience of adolescence within a lifespan context that not only accounts for time, but also multiple sources of influence. Understanding the longer-term impact of sexuality education is vital in informing the design and delivery of future programmes. It is clear from this study that much more about the long-term influence of sexuality education programmes during the formative years needs to be known and better understood and this can be achieved by studying adult sexual health, knowledge, attitudes and lifestyles.

In another paper from the USA, "*Parents' Attitudes toward Comprehensive and Inclusive Sexuality Education: Beliefs about Sexual Health Topics and Forms of Curricula*" Peter, Tasker and Horn studied the attitudes of parents about the comprehensive and inclusive nature of Sexuality Education. The rationale for their study was the acknowledgement that parents are sometimes perceived as barriers to providing comprehensive and inclusive sexuality education to young people. However, little is known about their actual attitudes toward providing such broad information to young people. They examine two different approaches to measuring parents' attitudes toward sexuality information, concentrating on 18 specific topics. Factor analysis was used to examine whether parents' attitudes were more consistent with a programme-centred (i.e., abstinence-only, comprehensive) or a topic-centred (i.e., physical health, sexual and gender identity, pleasure, and relationships) approach. Parents were uncertain about what form of sexuality education was actually offered but most were equally comfortable with both abstinence-only and comprehensive programmes. Parents' ratings of topics grouped significantly better by the topic-centred than the programme-centred approach and the results suggested that parents believe it is important for their children to have access to a broad range of sexual health education information. Crucially, this study is one of the few to document that parents support information for young people that goes beyond being comprehensive to include topics such as identities and pleasure.

In the paper "*The sexuality education and attitudes of college students in China*", Song used a cross-sectional survey to examine the type and quality of sexuality education and attitudes of college students in China towards sex and sexuality. The findings showed that most respondents lacked formal sexuality education. Neither schools nor parents were reported to be the major providers of sexuality education. The students reported that their main sources of knowledge and information relating to sex were their fellow schoolmates and the Internet. Participants reported insufficient or inaccurate sexual knowledge as a key factor in their participation in unprotected sex. Attitudes towards premarital sex and cohabitation, and homosexual relationships were reported to be more open and tolerant amongst students than amongst those of the older generation. The data from this study suggest that reluctance from parents and schools to provide formal and comprehensive sexuality education has resulted in unsatisfactory sexuality education in Hangzhou. The lack of sexuality education among college students may have had an influence on their unsafe sexual behaviours, which is potentially damaging to both their physical and psychological health. Implications for improving the quality of sexuality education for young people in China are discussed.

The special issue closes with the paper titled "*School-Based Sexuality Education and Implications for Health, Equity, and Social Justice in the United States*". In this article Elia and Tokunaga build a conceptual argument explaining how in the USA, school-based sexuality education has had a long and troubled history of exclusionary pedagogical practices that have negatively affected such populations as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer (LGBTQ) individuals, people of colour, and the disabled. The social ecological model is introduced to offer sexuality educators and school administrators a new way of thinking more broadly about how to achieve sexual health through sexuality education inside and outside of the school environment. Their paper uses critical analysis of current and historical school-based sexuality education methods and curricula in the United States. The authors argue that historically, sexuality education in school settings has been biased and has generally not offered an educational experience fostering sexual health for all students but also identify signs of reform and movement toward a more inclusive and progressive approach. Their work offers sexuality educators new ways of addressing structural issues to better serve all students to increase the quality of their sexual health. They argue that integrating critical pedagogy and anti-oppressive education can increase students' sexual health along physical, social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions.

In summary all the articles demonstrate the importance of understanding structural, socio-historical and cultural factors influencing sexuality education. These factors can be analysed from a macro (i.e. socio political and ecological) or micro (i.e. attitudes of parents, teachers or local stakeholders) perspective. The special issue emphasises the role of theory and of solid, comprehensive evaluation and research evidence, to push forward the agenda of sexuality education research in the post-post-modern societies. We are now seeing rapidly changing family forms, sexual identities and sexual rights globally, with schools being only one forum for the delivery of sexuality education. On-going research is needed to further clarify the mechanisms, by which sexuality education is most effective and meaningful, which in turn should result in more empirical and pragmatic based theory. There is a need to better understand the perspective of children and young people and the potential for less conventional settings such as the Internet, social and other media as well as peers, for learning and competence development related to sexuality. School based sexual education needs to reconnect with these tendencies, rethink and redefine the aims, modes of delivery and pedagogical approaches if it is to play a meaningful role

in children and young people's learning and competence development related to sexuality, sexual rights and related social justice.

References

Apter, D. (2011). Recent development and consequences of sexuality education in Finland. *BZgA Forum* 2, 2011

Corngold, J. (2013) Introduction: The Ethics of Sex Education, *Educational Theory*, Vol. 63, pp. 439–442.

Giddens, A. (1992). *The Transformation of Intimacy. Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press

Hirst, J. (2013). It's got to be about enjoying yourself: young people, sexual pleasure, and sex and relationships education. *Sex Education*, vol. 13, Issue 4, pp. 423-436

Ingham, R. & Hirst, J. (2010) Promoting Sexual Health in Aggleton, P., Dennison, C. & Warwick, I. *Promoting Health and Well-being through Schools*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, pp. 99-118.

Kingori P, Wellings K, French R, Kane R, Gerressu M, Stephenson J. (2004) Sex and relationship education and the media: an analysis of national and regional newspaper coverage in England. *Sex Education*, vol 4 (2): 111-124

Kirby, D. & Coyle, K. (1997). School-based Programs to Reduce Sexual Risk-taking Behavior. *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 19, 5/6, pp. 415-346

McAvoy, P. (2013) The Aims of Sex Education: Demoting Autonomy and Promoting Mutuality. *Educational Theory*, Vol. 63, pp. 483–496.

McNamara, P. M., Geary, T. & Jourdan, D. (2010). Gender implications of the teaching of relationship and sexuality education for health-promoting schools. *Health Promotion International*, Vol. 26, 2, pp. 230-237

Monk, D. 2001. New guidance/old problems: recent developments in sex education. *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*. 23, 3: 271–291

Newby, K., Wallace, L.M., Dunn, O., & Brown, K. (2012) A survey of English teenagers' sexual experience and preferences for school based sex education, *Sex education*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 231-251.

Oerton, S. & Pilgrim, A.N. (2014) Devolution and difference: The politics of Sex and Relationship Education in Wales, *Critical Social Policy*, Vol. 34, pp. 3-22.

Simey, P. & Wellings, K. (2008) How do national newspapers report on sex and relationship education in England?, *Sex Education*, Vol. 8 No. 3, pp. 357-370.

Thompson, R. & Blake, S. 2002 Two steps forward and one step back—the changing context for sex education. Editorial *Sex Education*, Vol. 2, 3: pp187-193

UNESCO (2009). *International Guidelines on Sexuality Education. An evidence informed approach to effective sex, relationships and HIV/STI education*. Paris: UNESCO

Wellings, K. & Mitchell, K. (1998) Risks associated with early sexual activity and fertility in Coleman, J. & Roker, D. *Teenage Sexuality*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, pp. 81-100.

WHO & BZgA (2010). *Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe. A framework for policy makers, educational and health authorities and specialists*. Cologne: Federal Centre for Health Education, BZgA