Tackling the 'difficult' subject: An ethnographic exploration of sexual learning in secondary schools

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Abstract

This thesis examines the different ways in which staff in secondary schools engage pupils around issues of sex, sexuality and relationships. Using material from a one-year ethnographic study in an area of London, it addresses the question of why sex education is such a 'difficult' practice and how we are to account for the problems and inadequacies of current provision. The study is framed within a policy and political climate that has expanded the opportunities as well as the pressures for schools to address the emotional, health and welfare needs of its pupils. New policy initiatives have meant that teacher-led formal sex education now occurs alongside other forms of learning and support facilitated by non-teaching staff. This thesis draws on contemporary literature on sexuality and schooling to examine the significance of these shifts and to explore the factors that constrain or enable communication about sex in different contexts within the school. The first two chapters outline the theoretical and methodological framework for the study. The following empirical chapters are divided into three sections. Chapters 3 and 4 examine the experiences of teachers alongside those of other members of staff with responsibility for addressing issues of sexuality with pupils. These chapters consider professional roles and expectations related to sex education and the factors that determine how and whether staff are able to achieve their goals. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on pupils' accounts of sex education and pupil behaviour in the classroom. Drawing on insights from psychoanalysis, these chapters explore the adolescent needs that lie behind pupils' accounts of SRE and their resistant behaviour in the classroom. Chapters 7 and 8 move away from the classroom and the teacher/pupil dynamic to focus on some of the alternative ways in which issues of sex and sexuality are addressed in schools. They look at pupils' communication practices in non-traditional school settings and at how pupils use these settings to experiment with different forms of subjectivity. In the concluding chapter I argue that the insights gleamed from these alternative spaces forces us to re-examine some of the key assumptions behind sex education as a 'difficult' practice.

Acknowledgements

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'It's hard being a young person, people forget what it's like sometimes'

Claire, Learning Mentor, Charlesford School

Introduction

This thesis is about sex education. More specifically, it is about the task of addressing the issues of sex, sexuality and relationships in secondary schools. Before I began this research, I was working in secondary schools in and around London. I worked with individuals and groups of pupils in my job as a Teaching Assistant and then a Learning Mentor. I also delivered workshops in schools, and training programmes for teachers, in different aspects of Sex and Relationships Education (SRE). I was the 'sex lady' who arrived with her box of gadgets and I was also 'someone to talk to' – or to be sent to – in the all-girls secondary school where I worked. In these different roles, I came in to contact with the numerous and often conflicting concerns of teachers, support staff, outside agencies, pupils and parents about exactly what it was that pupils needed to know about sex and whose job it was to pass on that information. As I moved between roles I became conscious of the huge adjustments I had to make in order to meet the demands of these different contexts and those I encountered in them. I became interested in how my personal experience and the tensions between these different roles related to broader tensions and ambiguities in an evolving and diversifying area of pupil support.

The material presented in this thesis is drawn from a year-long ethnographic study based in one main and two subsidiary sites; an all-girls school, an all-boys and a mixed secondary school. Each chapter examines how issues of sexuality are communicated in different arenas in the school in relation to the following three questions:

1. Why is it so difficult to address issues of sex/uality in schools?
2. How are we to account for the problems and inadequacies of SRE?
3. How are we to understand the relationship between pupils' behaviour and their needs?

These questions are explored through an examination of specific interactions that took place during my fieldwork as illustrations of wider issues and themes. The chapters are designed to illustrate different kinds of communication that take place in schools but also to address different perspectives and diverse viewpoints on how they manifest in

practice. The departure point for this thesis is the understanding that additional forms of support in schools open up alternative avenues for pupils to engage with issues of sex/uality. And, as such, they are also important sites within schools for rethinking the 'difficult' practice of delivering sex education in the classroom.

New sites, new roles and new forms of engagement in schools

> One girl reported that 'a teacher tried once; he started on about frogs, but after he had said about three lines on tadpoles and the fellows all laughed, he packed it in'. (Schofield 1967, *The Sexual Behaviour of Young People*, p.102)

Educating young people about sex and sexuality is widely acknowledged to be problematic. Studies into the micro and macro aspects of its delivery have almost universally acknowledged it to be a 'difficult' if not 'impossible' practice. As highlighted in the quote above, its problematic and contentious nature continue to sit alongside its more comic and salacious reputation. This was frequently made evident to me in the way adults respond to my research topic by recounting their own experiences of sex education as a source of humour and entertainment, something to be laughed at, dismissed. This very 'British' response to sexuality means that it has the propensity to be marginalised or trivialised when it comes to the 'big' questions and challenges facing the education system. Coverage in the national press however, suggests that what and how teachers and schools should provide sex education for their pupils continues to be a major concern at a parental, local and national level. Recent research (for example, Allen 2005; Buston and Wight 2002, 2006; Buston et al. 2002; Coleman and Testa 2006; Forrest 2004; Measor et al. 2000) as well as high-profile campaigns, such as that carried out by the UK Youth Parliament in 2007, suggest that it is also of great significance to young people. The rapid expansion in research in this field has brought attention to how little we know about young peoples' sexual learning and how out of step both government policy and teaching practice are with their concerns. A number of researchers have suggested that current provision is not just failing to meet the needs of young people, it is having a detrimental effect on their experiences and their developing sexual identities.

The question of how to tackle the 'difficult' subject of sex in schools has primarily been addressed in terms of the traditional teacher/pupil relationship within a classroom setting. Research has increasingly drawn attention to what is wrong with current teaching practice and what is missing from Sex and Relationship Education (henceforth SRE) programmes. We know from an expanding body of research that focuses on the perspectives of young people, that they are unhappy with the input they receive and in what ways they would like it to be different. Some studies have turned their attention to innovative new techniques and resources, such as the incorporation of media forms and the use of peer educators, in an attempt to discover what 'works' (Buckingham and Bragg 2004; Buston et al. 2002; Forrest 2004; Forrest 2002; Goldman and Torrisi-Steele 2005). This approach has contributed valuable insights into the opportunities for curriculum and professional development in schools and for ways in which teachers can try to plug the current resource and skills 'gap'. But we know very little about the other sites in schools in which adults and pupils engage with issues of sex, sexuality and relationships. Recent shifts in government policy, along with initiatives brought about by the Labour government since 1999, have led to an explosion in the number of 'new professionals' working in schools. These professionals are primarily concerned with meeting pupils' 'additional' needs, such as emotional and welfare concerns, developing confidence and self-esteem and removing 'barriers to learning' (Noden et al. 2001). This development has been accompanied by new job titles, new training courses and new methods for implementing, monitoring and evaluating the support pupils receive. While this diversity appears to be highly significant in the lives of pupils, it seems to be largely absent in the literature on sex education. As a result, we know very little about the role of support staff and external agencies in meeting pupils' needs in relation to sexual relationships, or about how that support is given or received.

This thesis focuses on some of the areas of support that have been made available as part of New Labour's 'changing children's workforce' (Cruddas 2005). The material presented in this thesis is designed to contribute to our understanding of sex education and the challenges facing sex educators, by exploring some of the less traditional contexts and forms of engagement both in and beyond the classroom. It takes as its starting point the fact that teachers are not the only adults who talk to young people about sex/uality in schools and that these other sites have something to contribute to our understanding of how pupils negotiate their sexual learning and how adults work to

meet their responsibilities. This thesis builds on existing literature on sexuality and schooling by providing an insight into some of the alternative ways in which pupils receive education about sex in secondary schools.

Key terms

Before outlining the context for my research, it is important first to point out the key terms that are employed throughout this thesis. One of the key issues in writing this thesis was how to use language in a way that could account for the material I wished to document. Using the terms 'sex' and 'sexuality', for example, presented something of a problem because of the very different meanings attached to sexual terms. To talk about 'sex' in relation to young people, tends to refer to a single act, *the* act. To talk about sex education is to talk about educating young people for sex, 'safe', heterosexual, penetrative sex. But, for young people, it is very often not about the act of sexual intercourse, the physical doing, but the talk, gossip, thoughts, feelings, fears, dreams, fantasies *around* sex. The experiences of developing bodies, the process and practices of dating, the flirtations, interactions and exchanges, many of which will not end up in, or have any intention of leading to, sexual intercourse. To talk only about 'sex' is to ignore the fact that talk around the sexual is ubiquitous, while actual behaviour is more limited. Statistics continue to confirm that the vast majority of pupils in an 11-16 intake secondary school will not have had 'sex'. But this is no indication of the part played by the sexual in other interactions and bodily experiences. The term 'sexuality' should overcome this limitation by enabling a much broader discussion of the sexual which includes not just sexual acts but also sexual feelings and sexual relationships (Scott and Jackson 2000). But using the term sexuality in the classroom, or in conversations with pupils, cannot help but sound adult and somehow pretentious. In practice, as pointed out by Mac an Ghaill (1994), it is also very difficult to use the term 'sexuality' without qualifying its connection to sexual identity and sexual preference. And, as illustrated by Redman (1994), if you refer to 'sexuality' in schools, it is automatically assumed that you are talking about *homo*sexuality where 'Sexuality' is that discreet topic in the sex education curriculum that refers to sex which is not heterosexual and to the discussion of sexual difference.

In order to overcome these issues, the terms 'sex' and 'sexuality' are used in specific ways throughout this thesis. Except for the occasions when I am referring directly to

the work of others, 'sexuality' is used to refer to sexual orientation. This is not in terms of what people may actually do or desire sexually, but to the categories of sexual identity, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT), which are used to define identity in relation to a normative heterosexuality. The compound term 'sex/uality' will be used to refer to the multitude of ways in which the sexual infuses – physically and mentally, publicly and privately – the everyday lives, both real and fictitious, of young people. It includes, but is not reduced to, the act of sexual intercourse, and makes no assumptions about sexual preference or about the nature of the act, feeling or comment it refers to. In that sense it refers to matters *pertaining* to the sexual. The term 'sexual' in expressions such as 'sexual domain' or 'sexual issues' refers more generally to areas of life around which the various aspects of sex, sex/uality and sexuality, cohere. With these distinctions, I hope to make clear the nature of the interactions I am describing, in ways that relate more closely to the lives of young people.

In order to place the material in this thesis in context, the following section outlines the key policy shifts and government initiatives that have contributed to the changing make-up of many of Britain's inner-city schools. This is not a comprehensive policy review but is intended to introduce the reader to those areas of policy that have shaped and facilitated many of the encounters described in this thesis. Details of specific initiatives are also referred to in later chapters.

Sex education, New Labour and new initiatives

This study is a response to changes taking place at a local and national level as part of the New Labour government's education agenda. While many would dispute the extent to which these changes have had an impact on the education pupils receive, there has nonetheless been a significant shift in the official rhetoric around sex education since Labour came to power (Atkinson 2002). While the only statutory element of sex education remains within the science curriculum[1], new government guidance and documentation contains a number of direct and indirect references to the way in which education about sex, sexuality and relationships should be organised and delivered in

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[1] All schools are required to teach the key elements of sex education set out in the national curriculum for science. All schools within England are required to have a separate written policy for SRE which must be drafted in consultation with the school's Board of Governors. Sex education was taken out of Local Authority control in 1989 and while the government provides written 'guidance' for schools, as do many local authorities, coompliance is not mandatory. The written policy must be freely available to parents, who retain a legal right to withdraw their child from SRE.

schools. In this way schools are increasingly being explicitly encouraged, and some might argue *compelled*, to develop their sex education provision despite the absence of a compulsory national framework. Government 'guidance' on the delivery of SRE in 2001, for example, is framed around recommendations of what schools 'should' do (DfEE 2000). By 2005, however, the Ofsted report into Personal, Social, Health Education (PSHE) in schools stated that the 'position' of any school which was not delivering a PSHE programme (including SRE) was now 'untenable' (Ofsted 2005:3).

The main thrust of the Labour government's education agenda has been to raise attainment and combat social exclusion. The establishment of the Social Exclusion Unit (1999) and initiatives such as the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (1999), Excellence in Cities (1999) and Connexions (1999) were designed to target underachievement and to provide focused, individually tailored support to pupils who were deemed to be 'at risk'. The emphasis was on a more holistic approach to pupils' learning, targeting areas such as personal development and emotional wellbeing. One of the implications of such initiatives was the repositioning of schools as caring institutions with a mandate to meet a wide variety of pupils' social and emotional needs (Reid 2005). Previous support systems and educational strategies such as Personal, Social, Health (and now also Citizenship and Enterprise) Education were seen as inadequate to face the major inequalities within pupil populations. The inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbie, highlighted the many problems with current support systems and the Every Child Matters (ECM) Green Paper (DfES 2003b), enshrined in law under the Children's Act (2004), was designed to instigate the more effective integration and delivery of children's services in order to achieve five key 'outcomes'.[2] Other initiatives, such as the Healthy School and Safer Schools Programmes (launched in 1999), make direct references to the necessity for provision in schools for pupils' sexual health, happiness and safety, and are tied in to the directives of ECM. Achieving these five outcomes became part of Ofsted's evaluation criteria in 2005, as explicitly outlined in Ofsted reports.

While the overall framework for SRE remains the same therefore, there are an expanding set of criteria against which schools are monitored and evaluated. Schools

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[2] Defined as 'Be healthy / Stay safe / Enjoy and achieve / Make a positive contribution / Achieve economic well-being'.

are now required to produce 'evidence' that they are working towards these goals, that they have procedures for consulting pupils on their needs, and for assessing the effectiveness of the provision in place (Ofsted 2007). Within this context, the issue is no longer whether, but *how* schools are addressing the emotional needs and personal development of their pupils and which agencies and organisations they are working 'in partnership' with to achieve those goals.

One of the effects of the Children's Act (2004), and of government initiatives aimed at tackling low attainment and social exclusion, has been the expansion in the number and scope of the professionals and paraprofessionals working in schools. In addition to teaching and administrative staff, these can include; Teaching Assistants, Learning Mentors, Educational Psychologists, School Nurses, Youth Workers, Home–School Liaison Officers, Educational Welfare Officers, Connexions Advisors, Social Workers, Counsellors and Police Officers, working as permanent, part-time or peripatetic members of staff. Many schools will also receive or 'buy in' input from 'specialist' organisations and service providers to fill gaps in their provision. These can all be seen as part of a 'changing children's workforce' with the express aim of delivering the government's policy agenda (Cruddas 2005). While the lack of set standards and format for many of these roles means that they can vary widely both within and between schools (Jenkins and Polat 2006; Watts 2001), statutory requirements mean that all pupils will come in to contact with, or at least be aware of, some form of additional adult support in their school. In this sense, the model of schools as based simply around the teacher/pupil binary is one which is no longer representative of pupils' experiences or of the way in which schools are organised. In addition, the model of sex education as the only formally sanctioned site within which discussions of sexuality take place between adults and pupils, is no longer accurate.

There is considerable debate over the impact of these strategies and the perceived contradiction between the emphasis on pastoral care and the government's drive towards continuous assessment and monitoring of academic progress (Bateman and Rhodes 2003; Buston et al. 2001; Hargreaves 2000; Harris 2006; Odih 2002; Williams 2004). But while there is some cynicism about the motivation for these strategies (e.g. see Odih 2002), the potential of such roles for addressing a much wider range of personal issues with pupils is widely acknowledged (Kendall 2004). The significance

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of these relationships for the ways in which young people learn about sex, and the kind of information and guidance they receive in schools, has received little attention in the literature on sexuality and schooling. Along with non-teaching staff such as care-takers, dinner ladies and administrative staff, the role of support staff remains mostly absent in academic research which, with a few exceptions, has focused almost exclusively on the role of teachers. It was clear from my experience as a practitioner in schools that the lack of reference to the myriad ways in which non-teaching staff provide crucial and often invisible support for pupils in schools is a glaring omission. This thesis aims to redress this absence by exploring the supportive roles I had direct experience of as part of my own work trajectory. It focuses on aspects of the conventional teacher/pupil relationship alongside some of the less conventional and additional supportive roles which are now present in schools. It is hoped that this approach will provide a context in which to re-examine some of the issues and debates about the delivery of formal SRE and to expand our understanding of the scope and possibilities for talking to young people about sex/uality in schools.

Chapter overviews

In Chapter 1, I map out the three areas of research that have shaped my thinking in relation to this project. These are the practice-orientated literature, the cultural studies literature and the shift within sociology and cultural studies towards psychoanalysis. This chapter maps out the different contributions that these three areas of research have made to our understanding of sex education as a 'difficult' practice. I also point out the limitations of this literature and indicate the other theoretical concepts from within these three perspectives on which I draw to make sense of the data in my own research. I show that together, the practical, the interactional and the emotional constitute both a knowledge base from which to carry out my research and a guiding framework within which to analyse my own material. I argue that while diverse, these three areas act as useful prompts to consider the different forces that act upon and through pupils and teachers in schooling environments, and challenge some of the common interpretations of data in this field. At the end of the chapter I introduce the reader to the research site and to the three schools where my research was conducted.

Chapter 2 introduces the reader to the methodological framework for my research and outlines why I chose ethnography as a method of data collection and inscription for this

project. In this chapter, I discuss my role as a practitioner and the ways in which this shaped my research design. The following section explores the issues I encountered when attempting to conduct youth ethnography in the current climate. I examine how the young subject is positioned within the current youth research culture in relation to the two concepts of participation and empowerment. This discussion is used alongside reflections from my own experience in the field to question some of the assumptions about the role of youth research in the lives of its participants. In the second part of this chapter I make a case for youth research which looks to some of the more uncomfortable and less convenient aspects of engagement with young people and which recognises the research context as just one platform on which young people engage with issues of sex/uality. This argument is used to outline why I have chosen to conduct a multi-site, multi-method ethnography, and status given to the accounts presented in this thesis.

Chapters 3 and 4 are empirical chapters that look at the experiences of teaching staff alongside those of support staff and 'specialist' sex educators. These two chapters outline the difficulties adults face in addressing issues of sex/uality in schools and see what can be learnt from the experiences of non-teaching staff. Chapter 3 draws on interview material with teachers and support staff from two of my research sites to examine how different members of staff understand their roles in relation to pupils' sexual learning. In this chapter I draw out the practical differences between teaching and non-teaching staff and how their professional expectations as well as practical constraints shape their communication with pupils about sex/uality. Using Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and *habitus*, I suggest that teachers must draw on different kinds of cultural capital in the SRE classroom in an effort to make these roles 'work'. I show how the very different attitudes of the Learning Mentors and Teaching Assistants to pupils' sexual learning also point to the relevance of social location and the wider diversity of social backgrounds that support staff represent. As such, this chapter looks at the balance between professional expectations, practical constraints and individual resources in adults' interactions with pupils and the kinds of cultural resources that are valued by pupils when addressing issues of sex/uality.

Where Chapter 3 looked at teachers in relation to support staff, Chapter 4 looks at another relatively new actor in SRE that is also shaping how SRE is imparted and

received. Chapter 4 explores the relationship between 'specialist' sex educators and teachers through practical examples from the classroom. Using detailed description from a placement at a mixed school, this chapter explores the dynamics of the relationship between myself as a visiting Teacher Trainer, and the Form Tutor of a Year-9 class, as it unfolds over a three-week period. This chapter gives concrete examples of what is meant by 'difficult' when it comes to addressing issues of sex/uality in the classroom and how this manifests in the interaction between teachers and pupils in the classroom. This chapter points to some of the tensions between a 'liberal' progressive sex education programme and a more traditional moral pedagogy and the need to take the practical and emotional implications of these tensions into account.

Chapters 5 and 6 turn away from teachers and support staff towards the narratives and behaviour of pupils to further explore the question of how we are to account for the difficulties and inadequacies of SRE. Chapter 5 looks at the narratives of female Year-9 pupils talking about their experiences of SRE and explores the assumption that pupils' negative assessments should be taken as a reflection of poor teaching. Focusing on the emotional aspects of their account, and the inconsistencies in their efforts to present a collective story of SRE, I suggest that there are other ways in which these pupil accounts can be read. Drawing on insights from psychoanalytic theory about the emotional aspects of learning and the teacher/pupil relationship, I show that these accounts can also be understood as a result of transference. Using psychoanalytic understandings of the role of sexual learning in adolescence, I show that pupils' relationship to SRE is complex and needs to be understood as being tied up with internal struggles and uncertainties about their own sexual development. This reading is used to show that pupils' relationship to SRE is more complex than often assumed and that we should not take their accounts at face value.

Chapter 6 takes up one of the common explanations for the difficulties of SRE - the 'problem' of boys' behaviour in the sex education classroom. This chapter explores key findings in the literature on boys and schooling through my own experience of working with male pupils in Years 8 and 9. This chapter takes up three key themes in the literature and public discourse – the expectations of teachers, the use of pornography, the role of homophobia – to explore the idea that boys are *the* problem for SRE. Using

detailed descriptions of my experiences working in an all-boys school, I suggest that boys' behaviour needs to be understood partly in terms of the expectations set for them by adults. Focusing on boys' behaviour during lessons, this chapter moves beyond the problematic behaviour of a minority of pupils to examine what that behaviour might conceal. Reflecting on specific incidents in the classroom, I give examples of some of the problems that boys face in their efforts to forge sexual identities within a highly restricted discursive frame. As with Chapter 5, this chapter illustrates the importance of challenging surface accounts of pupils' behaviour and exploring other explanations that recognise the challenges they face in their day-to-day lives.

In Chapters 7 and 8 the focus shifts from the formal delivery of SRE to explore one of the alternative forums that I was involved with in the course of my research. These two chapters explore what can be learnt about pupils' sexual learning needs by focusing on their communication practices, using an example of one of the alternative forums which are increasingly common in schools. These chapters focus on one particular project, SISTAZ (Someone in School To Ask Zone), which was run by Learning Mentors in conjunction with a group of female pupils. Chapter 7 looks at the role of play through an exploration of pupils' playful and often mischievous entries to an anonymous pupil-led advice service. Using five examples from the project, the chapter illustrates the provocative and explicit ways in which some female pupils used the problem page genre to play with sexual themes. In doing so, the chapter explores some of the difficulties associated with interpreting pupils' communications about sex/uality and the boundary between fantasy and reality. The chapter makes a claim for the importance of play as a significant form of communication for young people and has important information about their moral/sexual worlds.

Chapter 8 looks at the evaluative interviews and focus groups that I conducted with members of the peer-led SISTAZ project towards the end of the school year. Continuing the theme of how we are to interpret pupils' needs, this chapter explores the contrasting behaviour of pupils in the research context. It examines the resources this group of female pupils drew on to construct an authoritative voice about the sexual content of the project. Using extracts from these interviews the chapter asks how we are to interpret the 'performance' of a subject who is competent, knowledgeable and in control. I suggest that both play and performance are revealing of the way sexual

themes are employed but they should not be considered to have any direct or straightforward relationship to reality. I suggest that we should see these as examples of the varied ways in which young people communicate about issues of sex/uality and that projects like SISTAZ offer pupils important platforms on which to try out different aspects of their sexual subjectivities.

Before examining the empirical material for this thesis, the following chapter introduces the reader to the literature that has most shaped my thinking in relation to this project.

Chapter 1

Accounting for the difficulties of SRE: Three approaches

Introduction

In this chapter I introduce the literature which underpins the research presented in this thesis. I outline three different approaches to SRE in schools and discuss their contribution to our understanding of SRE as a 'difficult' practice. For the purposes of this chapter, these three approaches have been grouped under the headings of 'Practice-orientated Research', 'Cultural Studies Approach', and 'The Shift to Psychoanalysis'. Each of these approaches are outlined separately, drawing attention to key insights and theoretical concepts that have helped me to analyse the data gathered from a year-long school-based ethnography. In each area I identify additional theoretical tools that have allowed me to apply those insights to my own context. These areas are then discussed together to illustrate how the gaps in one are addressed by the strengths in another. In this chapter I show how these three approaches are used as a knowledge base and theoretical resource, as well as an analytical prompt to reconsider what other factors may be acting upon or through pupils and teachers in schooling environments. As such they provide different analytical lenses through which to view and interpret my own material. I argue in this chapter, that this is necessary for accounting for the complexity of the material at the same time as remaining grounded within the practical realities of schools as modern, bureaucratic institutions.

As highlighted in the Introduction, there is an expanding body of literature which focuses on sex education in secondary schools. This includes the focus on formal programmes of sex education as part of Personal, Social and Health Education (henceforth PSHE) as well as the exploration of sex education as part of the wider study of sexuality and schooling. While this literature focuses primarily on the relationship between teachers and pupils in the classroom, it offers important conceptual and theoretical tools for examining some of the alternative spaces and relationships I encountered as part of my research.

Practice-orientated Research

In this section I refer to the literature which focuses on classroom-based Sex and Relationships Education in the UK (with some references to Australia and New Zealand). This diverse body of research is united by a focus on the content and delivery of SRE and a desire to instigate practical change at a local and policy level. This literature has been important for my project in that it remains grounded in the material reality of schooling and acknowledges the practical and resource constraints and policy directives which shape everyday practice in the classroom. This literature is useful for illustrating the diversity of SRE provision in the UK as well as highlighting common problems and issues within the current policy framework.

Pilcher's (2005) historical overview of sex education in England points to the highly politicised nature of policy and practice in the twentieth century. Pilcher suggests that sex education has always been a politically difficult issue because it straddles the different areas of health, education and morality. This has been the cause of tension Pilcher claims, because there is a lack of clarity about where this responsibility lies. Pilcher points to the historical legacy of sex education as a site of struggle, brought into stark relief during the rise of moral conservatism in British politics in the 1980s and 90s. Outlining the key shifts in SRE policy since New Labour came to power in 1997, Pilcher shows the importance of grounding studies in their historical context and more specifically, in the political contexts which shape the character of SRE.

As discussed in the Introduction, there has been a key shift in government rhetoric in relation to SRE since New Labour came to power (Blake 2008; Pilcher 2005; Spencer, et al. 2008; Wylie 2005). While this has been described as a positive shift, researchers have identified a number of tensions in current guidance and a lack of clarity about the objectives of SRE (Blake 2008; Spencer, et al. 2008; Wylie 2005). Wylie (2005) highlights that while there has been a clear shift in language towards a more pupil-centred approach, government documentation continues to deliver very mixed messages to teachers about their role. Spencer et al. (2008) also identify a lack of clarity and suggest that there is a tension between government 'rhetoric' and government priorities. They identify two different approaches in the documentation since 2000; a morally defined framework and an 'empowering' public health agenda. They suggest that in

practice, the 'empowering' rhetoric continues to be subsumed by the governments' main agenda of reducing 'risks' to young peoples' health (p.353). This points to the practical problems for schools of how to interpret current policy and to extract clear messages that can be implemented. It also highlights the problematic nature of policy documentation and the gap between rhetoric and the way in which government resources are allocated.

Research which focuses on practice in the classroom is also useful because it highlights how schools interpret and implement government policies and guidance at particular points in time and how resources are allocated at a local level. This is important for understanding the relationship between policy and practice and how SRE is shaped by the demands of schools as bureaucratic, 'rationalized' institutions (Hargreaves 2000). According to Buston et al. (2001), current legislation does not provide a context which encourages standardisation in provision. As such, one of the defining aspects of the relationship policy and practice to come through in research is the variation both within and between schools in the way in which sex education is delivered.

One of the ways that researchers have examined how schools have interpreted government policy and guidance has been to focus on the experiences of teachers and senior managers with responsibility for SRE. Research has indicated that teachers are overwhelmingly negative about their experience of SRE and identify a range of practical obstacles and institutional barriers. Strange et al. (2006), point to a lack of support from senior management, few opportunities for training or INSET, low status on the curriculum and little allocation on the timetable as key factors contributing to a general lack of confidence and enthusiasm amongst teachers. They found that even where teachers had identified weaknesses, there were few opportunities for them to explore their concerns or to develop their skills. Buston et al. (2001) attribute the difficulties experienced by teachers to issues of management. They suggest that the nature and to some extent the amount of sex education, is to a large extent determined by those who are responsible for provision. They draw attention to the role of the PSHE co-ordinator and the extent to which schools' management teams choose to make SRE a priority.

These findings are an important indicator of the practical constraints that shape teaching in schools and are useful for thinking about the kinds of professional expectations and pressures that are placed on different members of school staff. They illustrate the way in which the practice of SRE is shaped by the kinds of resources and time allocations of individual schools and that these exist within overall budget constraints determined at a government level. These findings suggest that there is a problematic relationship between policy and practice, where many teachers do not have access to the resources, training or support to carry out its objectives.

Practice-orientated literature also makes a key contribution to our understanding of pupils' experiences of SRE. There has been a concerted effort within sociological research to move away from what have been described as 'adultist' concerns, to examining how children and young people define their own needs and experiences. Ongoing public concern about young peoples' sexual behaviour and health have led a growing number of researchers to turn their attention towards the effectiveness of SRE programmes from the perspectives of young people. This has included examining young peoples' responses to new approaches and initiatives, such as the SHARE, RIPPLE and APAUSE initiatives[1], as well as documenting young peoples' experiences of existing provision and how they would like it to be improved (Allen 2005; Measor, et al. 2000). In an increasingly number of cases, researchers are also developing teaching resources in conjunction with young people as part of their research (Buckingham and Bragg 2004; Goldman and Torrisi-Steele 2005). These approaches can be seen as part of what Holloway and Valentine (2003) identify as a 'new paradigm' in the sociology of childhood, which recognises children as competent social actors and acknowledges children's understandings and experiences of their own childhoods. This reflects a political concern which aims to challenge the paternalism of conventional approaches to

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[1] The RIPPLE Study Team based at the Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, conducted a randomized intervention trial to evaluate the effectiveness of peer-led sex education compared to teacher-led courses.
The SHARE (Sexual Health and Relationships) study team based at the Medical Research Council's Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, conducted a randomized control trial to assess the impact of a theoretically based sex education programme (SHARE) delivered by teachers alongside conventional sex education.
APAUSE (Added Power and Understanding in Sex Education) is an SRE programme developed by the Department of Child Health at the University of Exeter and evaluated by the National Foundation for Educational Research.

childhood, by focusing on how young people interpret their social world and define their own needs (Hirst 2004; Johnson 1996).

Bringing attention to the experiences of pupils is important for understanding the relationship between government policy, school practice and pupils' needs. In this way, this research claims to speak directly to the utility of sex education programmes by consulting those who actually use them. Despite often diverse approaches to the data collection and analysis, this research has produced a fairly consistent picture of how young people experience SRE. In the following section I outline the key findings of this research which have come to represent the problems with SRE and how young peoples' needs are defined. These findings can be summarised as follows:

- There is too much emphasis on the dangers and risks of sexual activity with a lack of attention given to the positive and pleasurable aspects (Hirst 2004; Ingham 2005; Measor, et al. 2000);
- Sex education is not explicit enough in that it does not address the details of sexual behaviour including feelings and emotions, focusing instead on biological or generalised explanations (Allen 2005; Allen 2007; Forrest, et al. 2004; Holland, et al. 1998);
- Teachers are too often unable or unwilling to answer pupils' questions or address their concerns and are over-reliant on worksheets and textbooks (Buston and Hart 2001; Buston and Wight 2006; Forrest, et al. 2002);
- Pupils want more time to talk openly about a variety of issues in an environment which is relaxed, 'fun' and non-judgemental (Allen 2006; Buston, et al. 2002; Coleman and Testa 2006; Forrest, et al. 2004; Hilton 2007; West 1999).

One of the broad areas of continuity across these different areas of research is the mismatch between the expressed needs of pupils and what is currently being delivered in the classroom. These findings identify areas of weakness in current provision but have also brought to attention the lack of consultation with pupils in the design and delivery of SRE programmes.

In focusing on how young people define their needs, this research has also highlighted the differentiation of need between different groups of pupils. Research by Measor et al.(2000), Hilton (2001; 2007) and Buston and Wight (2002; 2006), point to the different needs of male and female pupils relating to aspects such as the content of the lessons, the make up of the classroom and the approach taken by the teacher. They highlight huge variation within groups of male and female pupils but suggest that pupils had concerns shaped by gendered interpretations of the lesson. Differences in need were also identified in the process of gathering research where very different patterns of behaviour were identified in male and female pupils. Lees (1994) for example, found that boys struggled to have a 'coherent conversation' about their experience of sex education in a group context (p.285). Measor et al. (1996) describe a 'stark and absolute' difference between the behaviour of boys and girls in the sex education classroom, with girls appearing actively interested - or at least conformist, while the boys made their objections known (p. 276). This research suggests that pupils' needs are gendered and that the needs of boys in the SRE classroom are of particular concern.

Another gap in provision identified in this research is the failure of SRE provision to meet the needs of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) pupils (Coleman and Testa 2006; Fernandez, et al. 2008; Hirst 2004). Coleman and Testa (2006) found that BME young people have different needs in relation to sex education because they must negotiate a greater number of conflicting norms and values about sexuality than their white British peers. They point to the diversity of experience amongst BME youth and the ways in which they navigate the demands and expectations of family, community, nationality and religion alongside those of the dominant white culture. Research by Fernandez et al. (2008) identified a lack of culturally-relevant material and suggest that this is a reflection of much wider lack of understanding. They highlighted the role of local government agencies in providing culturally-relevant resources and identify a lack of joint-working amongst key stake-holders. They suggest that the way in which SRE is developed and delivered reflects culturally rooted perceptions about sex and sexuality.

The focus on young people's voices has brought attention to their negative experiences of SRE. It highlights the practical reasons why pupils are unhappy with SRE provision and makes concrete suggestions for how SRE programmes and teaching practices can improve. It has also illustrated that young peoples' learning needs are diverse and that

those responsible for sex education programmes need to take account of the different experiences and for this to be reflected in local planning and delivery.

In this section I have outlined the key areas from a wide body of practice-orientated research that were of particular relevance for my research. This research reminds us of the importance of taking account of the practical realities of schooling. This means situating sex education within its political and policy context and taking into consideration that schools are required to implement that framework within particular resource constraints. I have also drawn out from the literature the need to be aware of how individual schools work, the local constraints on teachers and how pupils assess the effects of those constraints on their own learning. I have suggested that this literature reveals the current 'state of play' and shows how different schools implement government policy at particular points in time. When it came to analysing certain aspects of my own research, the role of practical resources was insufficient to make sense of the resources being used or drawn on in the educational context. When teachers did not have access to practical resources for example, what else did they draw on? This led me to the question of what other kinds of resources were being used by teachers in the classroom.

I found it useful at this point to draw on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977). According to Bourdieu, resources also need to be understood in terms of social class and the unequal distribution of cultural capital. Bourdieu uses the term 'capital' to refer to the variety of resources held by an individual and cultural capital refers to the products of education. Adults and pupils in schools have different amounts and different kinds of cultural capital which are attributed with more or less value in relation to the dominant culture. According to Bourdieu, the dominant culture in education is one that favours symbolic mastery over practical mastery, ideas over things (Jenkins 2002). According to Bourdieu, this privileges the dominant classes because of their acquisition of the dispositions, modes of thought, action and embodied practice, necessary to do so. Bourdieu describes this in terms of habitus; the set of dispositions that allow individuals to feel more or less 'at home' in different social environments - or 'fields'. Along with cultural capital, Bourdieu suggests that the 'right' habitus, i.e. that which most reflects that of the school, make it easier for pupils to feel 'at home' in a learning environment in that they have a tacit recognition of the 'correct' practices (Grenfell and James

1998:14). This is the importance of implicit knowledge, learned informally and embodied in specific social practices than enable some pupils to succeed in education in a way that appears natural (Dimitriadis and Kamberelis 2006).

Bourdieu understood the role of education in reproducing social class in terms of power, power that is systematically 'misrecognised' (Bourdieu 1977:xiii). The widespread acceptance of the value and legitimacy of certain kinds of knowledge in education is described by Bourdieu as a form of 'symbolic violence'. Teachers have power because of their access to forms of cultural capital that are recognised as legitimate. This can be understood in terms of their knowledge of their particular subject, their professional qualifications but also the dispositions that mean that they occupy the position of teacher in a way that appears natural.

When considering the question of how we are to account for the difficulties of SRE in schools I have found it useful to think about resources not just in terms of the educational and financial resources available in schools but also in terms of class and the unequal distribution of cultural capital. Bourdieu's analysis is primarily framed around the figure of the middle class teacher, but it is also useful for thinking through the relationships between different adults who work in schools and the different kinds of cultural capital they bring to their role. I found it interesting to think about what kinds of cultural capital are drawn on to talk about sex by different members of staff and whether teaching about sex as opposed to any other subject, privileges a particular kind of habitus.

Cultural Studies Approach
The material discussed in this section is primarily drawn from contemporary ethnographic studies of sexuality, gender and schooling (Epstein 1997; Epstein and Johnson 1998; Haywood 1996; Johnson 1996; Kehily 2002; Kehily and Nayak 1996; 1997; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Redman 1994). This body of work has been particularly significant in shaping my own thinking, in that it provides detailed, close analysis of the dynamics of teacher/pupil relations and the way in which sexuality features in the daily interactions between pupils in schools. Applying post-modern, post-structuralist, and feminist insights to the domain of the school, these studies also provide an analysis of the power relations of schooling and how wider discourses of sexuality are implicated in

the practices of sex education. They address the power struggles that take place in the sex education classroom, but as one site amongst many, both formal and informal, in which issues of sexuality are played out in schools.

All of the ethnographic studies referred to this section draw upon the work of Michel Foucault. Using Foucault's power/knowledge couplet, schools are understood as sites of discursive practice in which a number of different and competing discourses are at play. A discourse from a Foucauldian perspective, refers to 'the way in which meanings cohere around an assumed central proposition which gives them their value and significance' (Holloway and Jefferson 2000:14). Cultural ethnographers have used the work of Foucault to demonstrate how meanings that cohere around 'sex' and 'education' are produced and reproduced within relations of power (Epstein and Johnson 1998:16). Johnson (1996) and Epstein and Johnson (1998), for example, use a Foucauldian analysis to look at the relationship between the practice of sex education and wider social and political discourses. Focusing on debates taking place in British politics and the mainstream media during the 1980s and 90s, they show how the social framing of sexuality acted to constrain the pedagogical practices of teachers in the classroom. They illustrate how sexual 'dissonances' and the dominance of the moral and ideological perspectives of the Conservative Right had the effect of designating certain discussions about sexuality as 'corrupting' and 'immoral'. This was seen to inflict a highly regulated official discourse upon teachers and to produce a very real situation of fear and anxiety about what could and could not be said. They describe teachers' position in terms of walking a 'tightrope' between the demands of pupils to address issues in the classroom and the personal risks associated with doing so (1998: 174). In this way, Epstein and Johnson make a direct link between the way in which discourses of sexuality circulate in the public domain and the practices of teachers in the classroom. This draws attention to the significance of the discursive context and of being alert to the different and dominant meanings attached to sexuality at the time of research.

Cultural studies approaches have also been concerned with the dissonances *within* schools and in particular, the problematic relationship between teachers and pupils in the sex education classroom. One of the key arguments in contemporary ethnographic research has been that sex education cannot be understood without understanding pupil

cultures and the ways in which they interact with those of teachers and the school (Epstein 1997; Epstein and Johnson 1998; Kehily 2002; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Redman 1994). Pupil cultures are understood by Kehily to constitute 'informal groups of school students who actively ascribe meanings to events within specific social contexts' (p.1). Ethnographic accounts have drawn attention to the centrality of sexuality to pupil cultures with an empasis on fun and excitement as well as conflict and antagonism (Epstein 1997; Epstein and Johnson 1998; Johnson 1996; Kehily 2002; Kehily and Nayak 1996; Kehily and Nayak 1997). Kehily and Nayak (1996), illustrate how sexual narratives, particularly those involving teachers, produce 'savoured moments of disruption' which celebrate group identity by challenging boundaries and turning situations into farce. This focus on collective entertainment is seen to be in tension with the 'dull regulation' of sexuality in the official culture of the school (Epstein and Johnson 1998). According to Epstein and Johnson, ongoing attempts to desexualise schooling in the public domain reinforce this tension and help to create the conditions for resistance and conflict. They argue that part of the 'currency' of sexuality in pupil cultures is that it provides easy material for pupils to challenge the authority of teachers and the values of the school.

Kehily and Nayak (1996; 1997) also draw attention to some of the other functions of sexuality in pupil cultures. They point to the varied and often hidden ways in which sexuality features in pupil cultures, which do not always involve conflict with teachers or pushing against the boundaries of the school. They highlight the element of humour and fun, but they argue that there is a danger that such incidents are marginalised or trivialised where in fact they play a significant role in pupils' lives (p.215). In particular, they point to the role of sexuality in pupil cultures for the formation of sex-gender identities. The use of sexual humour and jibes within the working class male peer group for example, is identified not just as a form of storytelling or game-playing but as a mechanism for policing the boundaries of heterosexual masculinity. This ritualised behaviour is described not as a 'product' or 'effect' of a particular masculine identity, but as *constitutive* of it (Kehily and Nayak 1997). In this way, interactions which are commonly 'dismissed' in the literature are seen to offer important insights into the way in which student identities are produced. This has important implications for the focus of academic research, in that it suggests that behaviour which is deemed difficult or disruptive may hold important information about the kinds of sexual

identities that are open to young people in schooling environments. It also points to the significance of social exchanges between pupils for the production and the regulation of sex-gender identities.

Where subcultural theory has in the past emphasised the creative and transgressive aspects of youth cultures, cultural studies approaches to sexuality and schooling point to the more oppressive, regulatory and conformist aspects of pupil sexual cultures. Epstein and Johnson (1998) suggest that schools are built upon a matrix of compulsory heterosexuality, where the boundaries of heterosexuality are continually policed and the punishments for transgression are high. Kehily (2002) and Mac an Ghaill (1994) draw attention to the normative constructions of gender within school-based cultures of masculinity and femininity and the different ways in which they are reemphasised by interactions with teachers. In contemporary ethnographies, previous glorifications of resistance are replaced with a more critical analysis of the ways in which pupil sexual cultures construct and constrain identities and re-inscribe inequalities.

One of the most important significant contributions of ethnographic research has been to highlight the contextually contingent nature of school-based identities. Combining sustained participant observation with in-depth individual interviews and focus groups ethnographers have brought attention to the very different ways in which pupils and teachers behave in different contexts throughout the school. In particular they have brought attention to the issue of bravado and the pressure on young people to perform or conform within the public arena of the school. In his study of school-based cultures of masculinity, for example, Mac an Ghaill (1994) points out that the social context in which he spoke with or observed young men and male teachers was of 'critical significance' in influencing how, when and what they felt they could or would say (p.96). During his interviews and observations he identified contrasting 'private' and 'public' stances through which different aspects of masculine identities were enacted. Ethnographic work on masculinity has identified the male peer group as a space of cohesion and belonging at the same time as being isolating and emotionally damaging. This is evident in the way in which Mac an Ghaill contrasts the confident sexism and homophobic bravado of the male peer group with the anxious and fragile narratives of young men during the interviews. Some of the boys interviewed by Mac an Ghaill made it clear that they would consciously adopt or hide behind particular identities in

the peer group which contradicted how they felt about themselves or how they behaved in other contexts. This brings to the foreground the multiplicity of pupil identities and the fact that different identities are consciously taken up or performed. This has been particularly useful for thinking about the different contexts that are explored in this thesis and the kinds of masculine and feminine identities that are possible in different spaces.

Ethnographic studies of sexuality and schooling draw out the importance of social interaction for understanding sex education as a 'difficult' practice. By focusing on how issues of sex/uality are played out between individuals and groups they allow us to see exactly what is 'difficult' about addressing issues of sex/uality in classroom environments. By focusing on the lived experience of schooling and the everyday interactions between pupils and teachers, ethnographic studies allow us to see how the problems associated with sex education manifest in practice. They show how different meanings are attached to sexuality and the tensions between pupil sexual cultures and the 'official' desexualised culture of the school. The work of Foucault has been used to locate schools within wider contexts which recognise the role of external power relations and discourses in shaping how sex education is delivered. It has brought attention to the socially constructed and historically specific nature of what counts as 'appropriate' knowledge about sexuality and the way in which schools reflect and respond to dominant discourses. As highlighted by Epstein and Johnson (1998), this is not just about the official curriculum of schools but recognising that schools are subject to much wider forms of regulation which have material and emotional effects.

The shift to psychoanalysis

The third approach that I found particularly generative for my research refers to the incorporation of psychoanalytic theory to the analysis of sexuality and schooling. Psychoanalytic and psychosocial perspectives are increasingly being used as an additional 'layer' within sociological research and have provided a useful tool for thinking through interactions in my own project. The shift towards psychoanalytic theory is evident within but not confined to ethnographic studies, where it is increasingly common to see psychoanalytic concepts such as projection, splitting, transference and counter-transference being used to make sense of the interaction

between teachers and pupils and how they negotiate issues of sexuality (for example, Epstein and Johnson 1998; Gilber 2004; Gilber 2007; Haywood 1996; Johnson 1996; Kehily 2002; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Redman, et al. 2002; Walkerdine 2001; Walkerdine, et al. 2001). Psychoanalytic theory assumes the presence of an active unconscious which is separate from the conscious part of the mind but influences behaviour and experience. A theory of the unconscious has been used to explore the social relations of schooling as made up not just of observable exchanges, but as constituted by unconscious processes that 'speak through the subject' (Kehily 2002). While psychoanalysis is a theory of the unconscious, it has much to say about conscious and social processes and has been used to explore aspects of sex education in ways that I have found useful and thought-provoking.

Psychoanalytic theory is now widely used in conjunction with, and considered by some to be complementary to, post-structuralist and Foucauldian analysis. Sociological and cultural studies approaches to sexuality and schooling have drawn on psychoanalysis as a way to explore what is not said in interactions but which is nonetheless present in communication between subjects. This is particularly the case in relation to anxiety and the behavioural responses to anxiety in the sex education classroom. According to Walkerdine et al. (2001), classical sociology does not analyse the way in which anxiety circulates. In contrast, the concept of anxiety is central to psychoanalytic theorisations of the emotional development of the individual (Briggs 2002; Henry 1999; Moore and Rosenthal 1993; Waddell 2002; Walkerdine, et al. 2001). Within psychoanalytic theory, the role of anxiety and the mechanisms for defending against it play an important role in the relationships between teachers and pupils (Salzberger-Wittenburg 1999; Youell 2006). Epstein and Johnson (1998) draw on psychoanalytic concepts to interpret teachers' behaviour towards their pupils. They describe how teachers often project their own anxieties about sexuality onto pupils, designating them with either 'good' or 'bad' sexual identities. In one example they describe how the 'gender-bending' of one particular pupil caused a number of teachers to distance themselves from him through the use of humour and homophobic comments amongst the staff group. Using psychoanalytic theory, this was interpreted as a projection of their own anxieties about sexuality onto their relationships with pupils. By distancing themselves from his ambiguous gender and sexuality they were understood to be involving this pupil in their own 'self-production'. This example brings attention to the role of

unconscious anxieties in shaping teachers' practice in the classroom. In this case, such anxieties were also shown to have had an impact on teachers' capacity to offer pupils support.

Kehily (2002) combines psychoanalytic theory with discourse analysis to analyse a classroom activity. Through close analysis of the content and responses to fictitious 'problems' written by pupils, Kehily shows how certain classroom activities open up spaces for the projection of anxieties and desires around the sexual. The 'fictitious' nature of the activity was seen to offer a way of 'speaking the unspeakable' where unconscious feelings were projected on to fictional characters and situations. This was seen to be revealing not just of the nature of those fears and desires, but of the gap between the concerns of pupils and the content of the formal SRE curriculum. In this way, the application of psychoanalytic theory to a classroom activity brought a dimension to the activity that had both a psychic and a practical resonance.

Gilber's (2004; 2007) application of psychoanalytic theory to sex education, provides an alternative account of the problematic dynamic between teachers and pupils. According to Gilber (2007), sex education is distinct from other subjects because of the psychic demands on both teacher and pupil. Drawing on psychoanalytic theories of development, Gilber approaches adolescence not as an age category but a 'state of mind'. Adolescent development is understood not as a linear process from an (innocent) childhood to an 'achieved' (sexual) adulthood, but as a period of transition in which a series of psychic and emotional tasks must be undertaken. These include, crafting an identity, making a relationship to one's changing body and falling in love with oneself and others. Such developmental tasks are seen to take place as part of the painful process of giving up passionate attachments to parents. Drawing on this understanding of adolescence, Gilber argues that sex education is inherently problematic, because it is necessarily entangled with adolescents' efforts to 'construct a self'. In order to talk about issues such as love and loss in the classroom Gilber argues, teachers and pupils are required to confront these difficulties and the vulnerabilities of adolescent development - both real and remembered.

Psychoanalytic theory insists that the task of becoming sexual, of developing a sexual identity alongside a sexual body, is a significant one. One of the problems for schools

Gilber argues, is that they underestimate what is involved in talking about sex(uality) and fail to acknowledge the difficulties (and the pleasures) of narrating those experiences. What is suggested through psychoanalytic insights is that the contexts in which these tasks must be undertaken varies enormously, as does the individual responses to those contexts, but that there are certain developmental tasks which all must pass through. Central to these is the task of moving from childhood to adulthood (and all that this signifies culturally and historically) and of defining oneself as a gendered and sexual being.

One of the areas of psychoanalytic theory that I found useful for my research were the insights into the emotional aspects of teaching and learning. Hargreaves (2000) suggests that there has been a 'disturbing neglect' of the emotional dimensions of teaching in social research (p.812). From a psychoanalytic perspective, learning is seen to be an emotional process, particularly because of its relationship to anxiety. According to Youell (2006), anxiety is an unavoidable part of learning in that there must be a recognition of the state of 'not knowing' in order for learning to take place (p.24). Pupils' relationships to teachers are understood in terms of the management of these anxieties and the expectations that pupils have of their teachers and the learning process. These expectations are understood to have their roots in childhood and the role of parents as providers and holders-of-knowledge. Teachers are often talked about as occupying parent-like roles on to which similar demands and expectations are placed. From this perspective, the role of schools in the mental life of pupils is often conceived as one of container; to make anxiety manageable so that learning can take place.

Psychoanalytic perspectives on the emotional aspects of teaching and learning indicate that the complex and often conflicting and extreme emotions that accompany teaching and learning can also be understood in terms of transference. The concept of transference is central to psychoanalytic theory and refers to the way in which feelings experienced in the past are transferred or revived by relationships in the present. Using the concept of transference individuals are understood to interpret and perceive situations and relationships in terms of what they represent. This is particularly useful for thinking about how pupils respond to teachers and the ways in which their fears and expectations are managed.

I have found the incorporation of psychoanalytic insights as an additional 'layer' of analysis, a useful way in which to draw on this body of theory. I do not attempt a psychoanalytic reading of my material in this thesis, but to apply insights from certain areas of psychoanalytic theory to particular aspects of my data. I found that psychoanalytic theory was able to account for the individual experiences of pupils and teachers and to offer an account of the investments they make in particular kinds of behaviour and responses.

The practical, the interactional and the emotional

In this section I have divided the literature into the three areas which have most influenced my thinking. In each of these sections I highlighted ways in which these bodies of literature have contributed to an understanding of sex education as a 'difficult' practice. In the first section, I showed how practice-orientated research was useful for remaining grounded in the material conditions of schooling and for locating sex education within a political context. This research highlights the significance of resources in the delivery of sex education, particularly in relation to specialist training, teaching resources and levels of support. It also points to the differences between schools and the ways in which SRE is shaped by the structure and composition of the management teams. This literature indicates that what is 'difficult' about SRE is related to the status of SRE at a national level and the way in which this translates into the practical allocation of resources at a local level. The second section looked at ethnographic research with a cultural studies approach and its assessment of the lived experience of teachers and pupils in the classroom. Cultural studies approaches have painted a vivid picture of the ways in which sexuality features in pupil cultures, focusing on its entertainment value but also its role in constructing and policing identities. They have also drawn attention to pupil sexual cultures and the 'official' cultures of the school. The focus on sexual cultures has stressed the regulatory and constraining aspects of school cultures, particularly in relation to gender and sexual identities. This approach points to the importance of social interaction in the delivery of sex education and for taking account of the factors which constrain and regulate interaction in the classroom. The use of psychoanalytic theory has drawn attention to the emotional aspects of teaching and learning in SRE. The application of psychoanalytic concepts to studies of sexuality and schooling points to the role of the unconscious and unconscious anxieties about sexuality as important factors in pupils

and teachers' experiences of SRE. In the following section I outline how these very different areas of research are used together as a framework for this thesis.

The three approaches outlined in this chapter focus on different aspects of sex education and draw on a variety of theoretical concepts and ideas. While diverse, I found that these three perspectives provided the theoretical tools and insights which spoke most directly to my project. Taken together I found them to be complementary, where the gaps in one were able to be addressed by the strengths of another. The practice-orientated literature for example, is useful in terms of understanding the detail of government documents and the content of SRE programmes but it tells us little about how policy directives and specific topics manifest in social relations between teachers and pupils. Ethnographic accounts offer vivid and evocative descriptions about how pupils behave in the classroom that allow us to see how these practical details translate into relationships between pupils and teachers. There is a danger with ethnographic analysis however, of becoming too focused on the details of specific interactions between individuals or groups, to the extent that the practical factors which shape and delimit those interactions get lost. In identifying discursive strategies and dissecting bodily practices, the demands and pressures of schooling environments can seem distant or immaterial. As such, the practical also acts as an important reminder of the need to step out of the interaction and to consider how the behaviour of pupils and teachers is shaped by the physical environment and organisational structures of schools.

Ethnographic accounts and practice-orientated literature have built up a detailed picture of the kinds of interactions that take place, of how pupils and teachers behave in the classroom and in the research context and how they talk about issues of sex/uality in those different environments. But this cannot always account adequately for the meanings behind those interactions, for why pupils and teachers behave in certain ways in certain contexts and what that behaviour may conceal. The notion of defensive strategies and the conscious and unconscious ways in which individuals defend against anxieties allows us to explore different aspects of school interactions which would otherwise be missed. This is particularly the case when behaviour appears excessive or contradictory in the context, or in those occasions where the story being told in the classroom or in the research context did not seem to 'fit' or account for the other feelings that were present in that encounter. Psychoanalytic theory offers an

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explanation for the non-verbal forms of communication that speak through the subject and helps us to understand why the interactions that take place in schools are so often fraught with emotion. As described earlier in this chapter, I am not attempting to do a psychoanalytic reading in this thesis, but to recognise the value of psychoanalytic insights as they have been applied in sociological and cultural studies approaches. These different areas are therefore used as different ways of reading the encounters I document in this thesis, and act as devices for testing theories against other interpretations. Taken together, they require that I take the practical, the interactional and the emotional into consideration when considering how to interpret the material I observed, recorded and experienced as an ethnographer.

Introducing the research

The research presented in this thesis was carried out in three secondary schools over a one-year period during 2004-5. The majority of my research was carried out in an all-girls' school for pupils aged 11-16, referred to in this thesis as Charlesford School. I also include research material gathered from two others schools; an all-boys secondary school that will be called Moorefield and a mixed comprehensive called Bard Community School. Spanning two neighbouring boroughs they are situated in some of the most deprived areas of the country with statistically high levels of unemployment and crime. All of the three schools had lower than average attainment and a higher than average percentage of pupils on the Special Educational Needs register and with Statements of Special Educational Need. In all three schools, just over half of the school population qualified for free school meals, commonly used in government statistics as a proxy for poverty[2]. Between 75-85% of pupils in all three schools were identified as being from ethnic groups other than 'White British', and between half and three quarters of pupils had English as an additional language. Bard School is referred to as a 'community' school because it supported a number of pupils with additional physical and learning needs as part of a positive inclusion policy.

While such statistics paint a very vivid and particular picture of inner-city deprivation there are number of key points to note which are not evident in these statistics. Because of their status as high priority areas in terms of economic, social and health deprivation,

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[2] For example see www.poverty.org.uk/115/index

these schools qualified for a number of additional government grants and had access to a variety of locally provided resources and support. They were located in designated Health Action Zones and qualified for Excellence in Cities funding streams as well as being involved with initiatives such as Creative Partnerships, Safer Schools programme, Business Mentoring schemes, and a host of local initiates and programmes designed to engage young people in active and creative activities and to tackle poverty and youth crime. In contrast with other areas of the country with similar recorded levels of deprivation, the schools had access to a significant number of additional forms of support and existed within vibrant and active local communities.

A second point to note about my research sites is that they were located in areas of London that are undergoing regeneration. Rapid gentrification in the areas around Charlesford and Moorefield Boys School was reflected in its physical makeup and in its changing reputation and indeed notoriety, both locally and further afield. The area had developed a reputation amongst London's young middle class for being fashionably alternative and avant garde. There was also a substantial and growing gay and lesbian community which had become increasingly visible and active in the local community. As such, it drew in both to live and for recreation, a large, young and predominantly white middle class who are not represented in the school statistics. While this was in many ways a separate, and for most young people, inaccessible area of local life, it nonetheless had a significant effect on the physical environment and on the visible make-up of the population in public spaces. This visibility contributed to the overall diversity of the area in a way which would be less present in more isolated or economically segregated areas. It is also important to point out, that while there were very high levels of deprivation amongst particular immigrant communities in the area, the ethnic majority population was also very economically and socially diverse.

This is very much a local study confined to a specific geographical location. It is also a local study in a more personal sense it that it is based in the area in which I grew up and had lived for 28 years. My research was carried out in response to my experience of living and working in the area and of my personal and political commitments to improving sex education provision. The details of my own work trajectory in these schools and the way in which this shaped my research are outlined in further detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 2

Doing youth ethnography; working within boundaries

Introduction

This chapter explores the methodological issues and ethical concerns that accompanied this project. It starts by outlining my work as a practitioner and the ways in which this shaped my research design. It then examines some of the issues and dilemmas of conducting youth research in the current climate, looking in particular at how approaches to youth research and the language used to theorise it construct a particular kind of subject. With examples from my own research as well as critical analysis from others, I illustrate how these issues can play out in practice, including some reflections on what can and cannot be anticipated when in the field. This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part outlines my approach to the young subjects of my research, through a discussion of the two concepts of participation and empowerment. The second part outlines reasons for using an ethnographic approach and explores the ethical and practical challenges I faced in conducting youth ethnography. In this chapter I make an argument for a particular kind of youth research and outline how the material in this thesis was collected, analysed and interpreted. The following section begins by describing the background to my project and sets out the reasons for conducting my research in this way.

On familiar ground

As hinted at in Chapter 1, my career and the motivation for this study were multifarious and, in some ways, accidental. I had not planned a career in education so much as fallen into it, and I had certainly not planned to work in sex education. Having found myself in education however, I found issues of sexuality unavoidable, being continuously party to conversations, questions, exchanges taking place in the classroom, the corridor, the lunch queue. My first job was working as a Teaching Assistant in a local girls' secondary school, supporting pupils on the Special Educational Needs register in classes across the curriculum. When I took up a post as a Learning Mentor in the same school, these exchanges moved from being incidental to my job to become a central feature. Not only was I actively engaging pupils around issues of sex/uality but I was

documenting them, discussing them and positioning them within overall strategies of pupil support. This brought me into closer contact with teachers and senior managers, but also with a host of local services, from Social Services and health services, to local government funded projects and charitable organisations. The primary role of a Learning Mentor is to work with individuals and groups of pupils to 'remove barriers to learning' (Kendall 2004)). One of the biggest shocks I had when starting the job was how often 'barriers to learning' were related to issues of sex/uality. These barriers could be anything from anxieties about puberty and sexuality to skipping school to spend time with a boyfriend, experiencing parental conflict, or being a victim of sexual abuse. The flexibility of the post meant that we were able to address these issues in a variety of ways including group work, therapeutic input and creative projects. By the time I began my research, the Learning Mentor team I was part of had established at least twelve separate projects which took place during school time, and had eight additional adults coming in to work with pupils during the week.

My work as a sex educator ran concurrently with my work in the school. It began when I volunteered as a speaker for a local charity that went in to schools to talk about pregnancy choices and abortion. This developed into a paid position as part of a multi-disciplinary team who delivered sex education 'days' in local schools. I then became involved in a teacher training project supporting teachers to develop their confidence with SRE, and later with a charity that was disseminating a new multi-media resource. This brought me in to contact not only with other organisations but with the staff, pupils and practices of neighbouring schools. Moving between teams and settings I began to see that, while many of the practical issues were evident in other sites, they manifested in different ways in different schools and with different individuals. Each posting involved a process of trying to decode how these issues manifested in that particular context and to piece together the most appropriate response. My role as 'visitor' accorded me certain opportunities and privileges in the classroom and the training session, but it also exposed the problems with outside interventions and of trying to tackle these issues from the periphery. Working in this way I saw how differently adults and pupils responded to me in these roles and how much I had to adapt to accommodate their contrasting expectations. I would sometimes find myself being distanced or completely ignored by some staff while others would corner me after sessions asking to borrow my resources or talk further about the project. I found some

groups of pupils inspiring and engaging, while others left me feeling utterly drained and despondent – with every variation in between.

Moving between different schools, working with different adults with different agendas (and pupils with their own agendas), I became interested in the kinds of adaptations I was forced to make in these varying situations. As Kehily (2002) highlights, issues of sexuality arouse anxiety in schools, or, as I also found, particular areas of sex/uality arouse a whole lot of anxiety for certain individuals. The contrast between a Learning Mentor meeting in which we would discuss the details of pupils' sexual activity, from concerns about prostitution, to how to address attraction for teachers or encourage more healthy sexual behaviour, and the awkward and stilted discussions that often took place during staff meetings, was glaring. As one exasperated Learning Mentor once put it, 'it's like, if it's got anything to do with sex then it is automatically a problem!'. Relating my experience to that described in other ethnographic texts it became clear that the climate in which these discussions were taking place was very different from that of the early to mid-90s (e.g. see Epstein and Johnson 1998; Kehily 2002; Mac an Ghaill 1994). The repeal of Section 28, the explicit focus on homophobic bullying in government documentation and the increasing pressure on schools to deliver on the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy and Every Child Matters agenda meant that the issues of sex and sexuality had a voice in the official discourse of the school, even if many teachers were still struggling to find their 'voice' when it came to discussing them in the classroom. While many of the practical and structural barriers remained, there was at least an acknowledgement that schools had to take responsibility for addressing these issues and for providing the documentation to prove they had done so. What seemed to be more of concern was how to go about proving their credentials without having to address some of the much more deep-rooted obstacles and challenges facing the delivery of SRE as a whole.

From the outset I was clear that my research needed to focus on the diversity of the exchanges that were taking place around sex/uality, and on finding ways to capture and record some of the complexities of these moments. I wanted a research tool that would enable me to explore how adults and pupils behaved in different encounters and to think critically about the implications for future practice. While I was interested in how pupils and staff interpreted the research relationship and used the opportunities

presented by it, I was also interested in how communication took place in other contexts that were not determined by the research agenda. For these reasons my research was conducted through a multi-site, multi-method ethnography. As far as possible I maintained key elements of my working life and made reflections on the different roles I had to play a part of my research. This meant that I conducted interviews and discussion groups, I observed lessons and took part in the daily life of the school, but I also ran a variety of structured projects and continued to work in a number of different capacities for local organisations. There were elements of my research design that did not materialise and inevitably I also found myself involved in projects or activities that were not directly connected to my research. Many of the logistical problems that researchers typically face when setting up fieldwork sites, in terms of access and support, were absent in my case. I stated clearly in my initial proposal how I would like to work in the school, the kind of work I was aiming to do and the procedures I would follow in terms of keeping staff informed and involving pupils in my research. This was agreed with the understanding that I would share my research findings at a later date if asked. From the start it was a mutually beneficial arrangement; I was a known figure, CRB-checked and not requiring managerial support and I was offering to run a number of successful projects in the school and to do so for free. In turn I had a platform to try out different ways of working and in which I had immediate access to the kind of material I was looking for.

Much has been written about the difficulties and concerns associated with conducting research in schools and with young people. These are discussed in this chapter, as are some of the factors that make researching sexuality and schooling a particularly contentious task. As discussed in the following section, how researchers go about conducting and writing up their research is not just an issue of how best to address the research question, it is also about what is considered to be the best and most valid practice when working with young people.

The new climate of youth research
Over the past 20 years there has been a growing body of policy and practice initiatives aimed at addressing 'youth issues' running alongside a new framework of children's rights. The focus is increasingly on placing children at the centre, giving them a voice,

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listening to their needs, supporting their right to be heard and to make decisions about their lives. In public policy, children and young people are no longer seen as a 'homogeneous mass', but as distinct individuals, competent and capable of agency. This changing political climate is evident in the practice of youth research which has seen a significant shift towards a culture of active participation (see Clark et al. 2001). What has been described by some as the 'new sociology of childhood' aspires to view children not as objects of research but as social actors, experts in their own lives (Pole, et al. 1999:40). Linguistically, this shift from passive object to active subject can be seen in the way that research is no longer talked about as being 'on' or 'about' but *with* children and young people. In practice this has led to a number of methodological changes in the way in which young people are engaged in the research process, and framed within the research agenda.

When it came to engaging with the literature at the start of my project it became clear that there were many similarities between the language used to theorise youth research and that employed in youth settings. Just as in project reports, funding applications and practice guides, descriptions of methodological practice seemed to be almost exclusively concerned with how well young people had engaged with the research process and how the research had facilitated and enabled their personal development. While I recognised that these represented important shifts in the youth agenda I was cautious of the frequency and ease with which some of the concepts were being used. I also felt a little uneasy about the assumption that research was only 'good' or viable if it adhered to certain basic assumptions about who young people were and how they were to be worked with. This section examines two of the main concepts employed in youth research, those of participation and empowerment and explains how I used them in relation to my own project.

Participation

Shifts in youth research in the 1970s signified a move away from studying young people as objects towards trying to understand young people from 'the inside', what their lives meant to them, how they understood their situations and why they behaved the way they did (Clarke et al. 2001:1). This meant not just observing or asking, but spending time with young people, engaging them in activities or projects and trying as far as possible to record their understandings in their own words (ibid.). Recently there

has been a move to increase participation at all levels of the research process. While participatory research can take many forms, and the level of participation is equally varied, increasing participation is based on the assumption that 'the perspectives of young people are not simply objects of study, but must actively shape the research process' (ibid., p.2). Participation in this sense can mean getting young people involved in *how* research takes place, situating them as holders of technical expertise with valid contributions to make to the research process. Emond (2003) for example, describes how her research into young people in care homes *became* an ethnography as a result of discussions with her research participants who were critical of her original research design. According to Clark et al, involving young people in this way is representative not just of a methodological shift, but also a political one about the place of young people in society as a whole.

The move towards greater participation in research is a product of an increasing awareness of the objectifying nature of previous research techniques. As Clark et al. point out, there has been a move across the social sciences to develop a new set of research relations that challenge the power imbalances in the research situation, one where the 'privileged position and knowledge of the expert is decentred, as the voices of the oppressed and their subjective experiences are moved centre stage' (Trinder, quoted in Clark et al. 2001, p. 9). The move towards greater participation in activities through which those voices can be heard has led to a drive for methodological innovation and greater flexibility. This has inevitably affected the way in which data is collected. While much of the research conducted with young people continues to employ techniques used in adult research (i.e. participant observation, interviews, questionnaires etc.) many researchers, in an effort to engage young people and involve them in the research, have striven to develop techniques that are considered more 'child-friendly' (e.g. see Alderton 2001; Buckingham, et al. 2003; Pain and Francis 2003). At the heart of methodological innovation is the idea that, to 'speak' effectively to the research topic, young people need to use mediums or be in environments that are familiar to them and which reflect their own communication practices. Central to this approach is a recognition of the social gap between researchers and their participants, and a concern for how this may impact on the research findings. This is not just a matter of age but also about addressing the impact of gender, class and 'race' on the research relationship, in a situation in which young people are both vulnerable and impressionable.

Thinking about how to involve my young participants in a way that was productive not only in terms of my research questions, but also for them, raised a number of difficult issues. While the recent methodological shifts reflect important issues about power and authority, there is also a tendency in some youth research to position young people as 'experts' in their own lives (Brannen 2002), and to favour their expertise over that of the researcher. This seemed to represent not only a false humility in some cases, but also a tension between the emphasis on maturity and agency and efforts to produce research encounters that were more 'fun'. As Punch (cited in Fraser 2004 p.2) points out, if young people are so 'competent' and 'autonomous' then why the need for 'child-friendly' techniques? This suggests some confusion about exactly who the subject of youth research is and how they are positioned in relation to the adult researcher. According to Pole et al. (1999), children's agency is necessarily limited and contingent, and to pretend otherwise is simply a form of 'masquerade' (p.50). It is not just that there is no possibility of research making up for these unequal power relations but also that the involvement of young people in the research process is not *per se* a guarantee of improving the quality of the research data or their lives: 'to expect merely the deployment of so-called participative methods (tools) to yield a methodology which captures and celebrates childhood and children's agency is to fail to recognise the constraints under which the research process yields knowledge about aspects of social life' (ibid., p.51). It seemed to me that the frequent use of 'participation' as a strategy was often more tokenistic than it was practical. As McRobbie (2002) points out, it is now common practice to draw in more actively the participation of respondents in a bid to create research that is more 'democratic'. The question for me was, what exactly was it that I was asking them to participate in?

The following example, taken from my own research, is an illustration of some of the issues that have just been discussed in relation to alternative methods of data collection and the ways in which this facilitates participation. It also highlights how the act of participation and the motives for doing so can be less clear cut and less predictable than is often portrayed in research.

One of the projects I ran during my fieldwork was called SISTAZ (Someone In School To Ask Zone) which consisted of putting together a weekly Problem Board with a

group of trained Peer Mentors. I had set up the project with another Learning Mentor and we had run it successfully together for three years prior to my fieldwork. The pupils met voluntarily in their lunchtime to answer anonymous questions posted in the school 'problem box'; the questions and the responses were then displayed on a public board in the playground. This provided a safe space in which they could discuss personal issues such as masturbation and lesbian sexual feelings without individuals having to refer directly to their own lives. With the focus on the project and not the research, participation for them meant investing in something that was highly regarded by other pupils in the school and of which they felt they had ownership. They enjoyed the opportunity it presented to talk openly about sex, sexuality and relationships and were enthusiastic about our weekly meetings and the success of the project. When I first asked the SISTAZ team if they would take part in a discussion group about their experiences however, their response was luke warm. They asked where it would take place and hearing that it would occupy one of the lunchtime sessions they seemed even more reluctant. When one pupil asked rather slyly why they didn't conduct it at my university where I actually 'did' my research, the prospect of a trip suddenly gave it a whole new appeal. And that was their exchange – they would do my focus group if I took them to my university and showed them round. The focus group then became very quickly about what they should take, what they could wear, would there be boys there, what lessons they would miss. Deep down I wanted their enthusiasm to be about the research, but experience forced me to accept that there were other forces at play. After much protest about having to wear their school uniform they compensated by conducting themselves in an impeccably adult way. On a hot and sticky day, with little time and not enough refreshments they were able to speak to students, shop in the Union, ask appropriate questions and follow my instructions. Before going up to the faculty roof terrace to have a drink before the focus group, they were model students. On the roof however, with fresh air, ten minutes to spare and not another adult in sight they quickly descended into petty squabbling. After a brief fight involving a (slight) bump to the head, some tears and a severe reprimand from me, the situation was partly diffused with a last minute group photo. Later, sat in a circle around the digital recorder, they appeared to be again the model students. Once back in role, they politely answered each question, did not talk over each other and expertly 'performed' as knowing subjects. Adjusting the content and language of their responses for their new audience, they eloquently recounted what it was like for 'people our age' in 'today's

world'. Unable to contain my surprise, at one point I interrupted to ask why they were using the word 'intercourse' so often when I had never once heard them use it before. I was met with coy smiles and someone offering to use the word 'sex' instead. Realising I was embarrassing them, I moved on.

Back at school I asked them to feed back on the focus group and the kinds of issues that were discussed. Clearly still sore from the incident on the roof they were straight up out of their chairs, pointing fingers and shouting at full volume about whose fault it was. It took several minutes again to diffuse the situation and get them sat back down in their seats. I asked why they had changed their language so much and they said they felt embarrassed about all the things that went on in the sessions and it was just too embarrassing for them to talk about the anonymous problems in public. I deduced from the conversation that it was not just vocalising the issues or physically using the words that they were concerned about, it was also the impression of young people that the discussion would give to their new audience. While the pupils were happy to discuss those things with me, a familiar female in the safety of school, they were not happy sharing this kind of knowledge, and possibly risking betraying their peers, to the outside world. It was clear to me that no matter what questions I had devised I would not have got a more concurrent response in that context. There is no doubt that they wanted to 'have their own voice' given how keen some of them were to answer the questions and how vocal they were about my using their real names and pictures. But participation was always to be on their terms.

What this brief example reveals is that the act of participation and the kind of data it elicits is influenced by a number of factors that cannot always be accounted for in research design. The contrast between behaviour at school and in the focus group was clearly influenced by the unfamiliar surroundings and the 'new' audience represented by the digital recorder, but it was also to do with what they believed they were being asked to participate in. They were well aware that they were being asked for their 'expert' opinions; and the control they exercised over the content of the focus group – as well as the way they had manipulated me in order to get there – had a significant impact on the kind of data the situation produced. In terms of evaluating the data, some difficult questions arose about how to use the information, given my full awareness of the *managed* performances I had witnessed. In one sense it is inevitable that any

managed situation is going to produce a managed voice, and this was no less the case in the lunchtime sessions with the girls than it was in the focus group. It is not that the managed voice is less valid or less 'authentic' either; it is representative of how the participants responded to that particular situation and of the way in which they wished to be perceived. The dilemma was how to match those managed voices – and the way the pupils wished to be perceived in the research context– with those other voices, less coherent, less articulate, and more disruptive of adult ideas about what young people are, that I had become so familiar with in the lunchtime sessions.

Focusing my research on a pupil-run project with an independent aim is an example of how alternative methods of data collection can facilitate pupil participation without creating artificial sites of investigation. It provided an opportunity to observe how pupils participated in the discussion of sensitive and difficult topics in a way that allowed the complexity and contradictory nature of those discussions to remain part of the research. By tacking my research onto an existing project, the pupils could choose to participate – or not, as in some cases – in something which was part of the fabric of the school and would not disappear when I exited the field. The use of a focus group alongside this project provided me with an opportunity to see how differently my familiar subjects approached the topics when the motivation and the environment changed. It gave me a sense of what a public voice might sound like and of the kinds of knowledges and competencies that were valued in their public role. In this sense, positioning them as 'experts' produced just one of many voices that I encountered during the course of my research.

Empowerment

In recent years 'empowerment' has become the buzz-word of youth policy and youth initiatives and has, as such, come to signify good research practice when working with young people. Central to the new research climate is the idea that working with young people need not necessarily be exploitative, and with the right methods and approach can – and *should* – be empowering for young participants. This attitude has been a feature of youth research undertaken from a feminist or anti-racist standpoint, as a way to determine not only the outcome for participants but also the research design (see for example Mac an Ghaill 1988; Oakley 1982). As discussed above, the development of new methods for gathering data, and the greater inclusion of young people in that

process, is based on the assumption that they are competent social actors capable of agency. While it is recognised that children's agency differs from that of adults, and the extent to which they are able to realise their own agency is dependant upon a wide range of factors (Pole et al.1999), empowerment is still seen as an achievable and desirable goal for youth research. By turning a potentially exploitative relationship into one that is productive for young people, empowerment through research is also seen as a way of 'giving back'. More often than not, it is now written in to the research design, and 'good' research is that which contributes in some way to young peoples' educational, social or emotional development. This is as much the case in contemporary youth ethnographies as it is with other approaches to youth research.

One of the ways in which research is seen to be potentially empowering is for data collection to be based around methods that incorporate the teaching and learning of new skills. Some of the more popular examples are the production of short films or video diaries, making a learning resource, receiving training and accreditation, and the use of art and drama. By emphasising the educational benefits for young participants, researchers are able to address the difficult issue of participant motivation as well as feeling that they are rewarding young people for taking part. More recently, researchers have turned their attention to the role of emotional learning, and the psychological skills that can be gained by adopting certain methodological techniques. As Clark et al. point out, youth research has witnessed a recent shift from listening to young peoples' voices to actively 'supporting young people in understanding their own lives and the issues that concern them' (p.2). From this perspective the concept of empowerment is often understood as the psychological journey taken by participants and researchers, where the practices and techniques employed are aimed at uncovering and addressing internal and unconscious processes. As Frost (2003) argues, this is part of a post-modern ontology, influenced by psychoanalytical discourses, that sees the research subject and their world as characterised by ambivalence, ambiguity and internal/external conflicts: this can be seen as a significant departure from the prevailing approach to youth research that aims to treat young peoples' voices as valid standpoints in their own right.

The notion that research can be empowering is often framed around an understanding of empowerment as something that, with the right technique is simply offered or *given* to participants, and whose effects are easily identifiable by the researcher. In my own

research I found it to be a much more subtle and hidden phenomenon and not something that could be fully directed or controlled. Even with projects that had clear empowering aims, it was difficult to predict or assess the extent to which empowerment was achieved. What I experienced more often were the subtle ways in which young people chose to subvert the power relationship or struggled with the responsibility that empowerment entails. There appears to be a greater complexity around the concept of empowerment than its current and frequent deployment might suggest. There were a number of projects I worked on that had empowerment as an aim. I would like to give one example that illustrates my attempt to realize this aim.

One of the sex education projects I took part in during the period of my research involved working with an all-male Year-9 class and their teacher over a period of three weeks. I had worked in the school before and despite the fact that it was due for closure in a year after failing during the 'Special Measures' period, and was renowned for violence, bullying, discipline problems and poor results, I had in the past been pleasantly surprised by the behaviour of the pupils and their attitude to me and the topic. The aim was to model different approaches to sensitive issues openly, so that there might be a framework for discussing issues in more depth in the future. During the sessions the pupils were encouraged to ask questions, use language and discuss topics that are generally taboo in the school environment. From the start of the first session one young man, and soon a small group around him, took this as an opportunity to test my authority and assert his or their own, asking explicit questions and shouting abuse across the classroom. His behaviour was demanding and verging on the aggressive, not towards me but towards other less vocal pupils in the room. His peers, of predominantly West Indian and African decent, kept telling me to ignore him, joking that he was Nigerian and that was the way they did things there. They were clearly accustomed to his manner and behaviour, as well as bored by it. The Asian West-Indian teacher I was working with had no trouble in continually reminding me after class that it was only because I was white and a woman (the only one of either in the room) that he was 'taking the piss'. These disruptions seemed to be the source of minor satisfaction to him and he would occasionally bellow across the classroom to '*Be quiet and listen to miss!*'. Such interventions complicated what was a simple disciplinary issue but so did the fact that many of the questions raised by this pupil (and quashed by his teacher), were ones that I felt urgently needed addressing. Not feeling threatened, only slightly

exasperated by this situation, I tried to use his explicit questions as sounding boards for class discussion. I stubbornly refused to send him out of the class and resorted to military-style discipline that at least kept him in his seat. By the end of the project his participation was more manageable and even on occasion, insightful, but not without its costs. I was only able to work on certain areas with the class and the group dynamic suffered as I was continually distracted by his behaviour. I had not achieved my objective of laying in place a sound culture of behaviour and understanding, but I had managed to keep a young man that spent most of his school life in the corridor, in his seat.

This example illustrates that simply having the right approach and a commitment to empowering young people is not enough. In that situation I had no control either over the previous management of the group I was going in to, or how they felt about a young white woman coming in to talk about sex. There were many factors at play in that situation to do with the gendered and racialised nature of the pupils' approach to the issues, their expectations, my role, and the circumstances of the school, that my perspective on what was feasible in that context had to be continually readjusted. The way in which the class had been managed in the past meant that the sexist, homophobic and aggressive behaviour of one young man had dominated any discussion about sex and relationships and as a result, it was simply not done. In a group of predominantly working-class fourteen-year old boys, a large number of recent refugees many with limited English, some sexually active, most familiar with hardcore pornography, this was a group with distinct and significant needs. The practical reality was that, after two years of 'Special Measures' and faced with the school's imminent closure, most teachers had given up trying to deliver sex education, preferring to opt for more manageable subjects. There was no doubt about the pupils' desire to talk about the issues but my capacity as either a researcher or an educator to have any effect on their educational or emotional development was severely limited by the circumstances. My ineffectiveness in 'empowering' these young men however does not diminish the significance of the research encounter. In fact, it was one of the experiences that I continually returned to when trying to think through other issues during the course of my research. While my own experience was one of frustration at being undermined by the teacher and failing to meet my objectives with the group, it demonstrated powerfully to me some of the key challenges facing pupils and teachers working in what are often

very trying circumstances. In that sense, it was as much my inability to affect positive change that was significant as any more empowering objectives.

The language of empowerment in mainstream policy and youth work has become a key feature of the youth research agenda. While there is clearly a lot to be gained from research having a positive education/emotional outcome for its participants (or at least from ensuring that it is not emotionally damaging), there is a danger of imbuing the research process with greater social/therapeutic promise than it may actually have in practice. As Frost (2003) highlights, the highly authoritarian nature of many of the institutions in which youth research takes place means that empowerment in any meaningful sense, is often not possible (p.128). However, admitting that researchers are unable to transcend the power divide does not necessarily mean that their work will be oppressive (ibid.). As stated by Kelly et al., 'A distinction needs to be made between not exploiting participants … and more grandiose ambitions' (quoted in Frost 2003, p.128). There are many ways in which work with young people can be respectful and considerate of their needs and capabilities, without making claims that may be impractical or unrealistic. As highlighted in my example, it may also be that what is of interest to the research project is not necessarily bound up with the demands of empowerment. By placing the emphasis on the outcome for participants there is a danger of entering into a culture in which proving their educational or emotional empowerment over-rides some of the uncomfortable but possibly more revealing insights that pupil behaviour and responses reveal. This is not to say that research should not have empowering aims or a desire to instigate change in young peoples' lives – my own research and practice are entirely based upon political commitments to that effect – but that we should not be naïve about the power of the research process to affect that change. It may be in some cases that the vehicle of change is not in the encounter itself but in the power of research to relate what was not achieved, what did not work and what was awkward and difficult.

In this section I have illustrated the way in which the new subject of youth research is constructed as a person who is competent, articulate and capable of agency. I have outlined the way in which efforts to overcome the power imbalances between researcher and participant have resulted in a growing emphasis on the social/educational/emotional development of young participants. I have argued that this model of the young subject

runs the risk of over-emphasising their competence and reveals an excessive keenness to position young people as part of the adult world. I have suggested that by constructing the young research subject in this way there is a danger of missing out on key aspects of such subjects' lives as well as restricting their freedom to act in other, sometimes less convenient, ways. I have argued in this discussion that while it is important to listen and to give young people a 'voice' – and avoid some of the objectifying and exploitative relationships of the past – this must not stop us also allowing them to be human, and thus capable of *not* knowing, of being resistant, playful or emotionally blind. As outlined in this section, my approach has been to listen to young people and to observe and record their interactions but not to be uncritical about those voices and to be aware of their limitations and resistance to being part of research. I have approached the concepts of participation and empowerment with caution and suggested that while useful and relevant in some instances they do not solve the problem of unequal power relations and we should be realistic about the capacity of the research process to affect change in the lives of the participants.

The second section of this chapter looks at how these issues shaped my research design, and my decision to conduct a multi-site, multi-method ethnography.

Doing ethnography, being an ethnographer
In the first half of this chapter I challenged the assumption that participation and empowerment are the only marks of value in youth research. I suggested that there were other aspects of pupils' lives that were of importance to research and that participation and empowerment were far more complex and slippery terms than youth researchers often made out. One of the distinguishing features of this project is that it focuses on diversity and aims to capture a range of roles, contexts and interactions that take place in schools. How I interpreted the ethnographic process as the most appropriate means to achieve this is outlined in the following section of this chapter.

Ethnography has been described as not so much a method as a process. According to Skeggs (2001), the definition of ethnographic refers not just to how data was collected but also to what questions were asked and how they are analysed. The weight and content of the *Handbook of Ethnography* (in which Skeggs' article appears) are testament to the broad range of subjects that have become the focus of ethnographic

research, as well as the different ways, both qualitative and quantitative, in which ethnographers have attempted to approach, capture and record their data. Where ethnography has long been enshrined as a method, theoretical orientation and even philosophical paradigm within anthropology, Tedlock (2000) claims it has now been extended and applied in fields as diverse as cultural studies, nursing and engineering. Wherever it has been adopted, according to Tedlock, a key assumption has been that 'by entering into close and relatively prolonged interaction with people (one's own or other) in their everyday lives, ethnographers can better understand the beliefs, motivations, and behaviours of their subjects than they can using any other approach' (p.456.). When thinking about how to capture the diversity and complexity of the schooling environment and the encounters I wished to document, it was very much this notion of proximity over time that drew me to ethnography. This was not just proximity in the interview, or regular contact through discussion groups, but proximity to all aspects of school life, from the classroom to the playground, to the lunch queue.

Another key aspect that was important for my own project was the flexibility of ethnography. Many have pointed to the fact that ethnography allows researchers to adapt to their surroundings and develop their methodological approach as they become familiar with the field (e.g. see Emond 2003; Hollands 2003). As I was already familiar with the sites in which I had chosen to conduct my research, I faced a slightly different task. According to Gordon et al. (2000), the familiarity of schooling means that, contrary to the traditional anthropological objective, the task of the education ethnographer is to 'make the familiar strange' again. This was even more so in my case in that it was not just schooling that was familiar, but the particular institutions and individuals with whom I worked. Conducting research in such a familiar setting had obvious logistical advantages in terms of access to the field, personal and professional connections and being aware of the internal politics of those institutions. But it also meant that I was aware of those aspects in a very habitual way. My challenge in moving from employee to researcher was to separate out the constituent parts, to think differently about areas of familiarity, to try to make sense of things I took for granted. In a similar way to that described by Kreuger (1996), this involved the difficult task of examining how I felt about the different aspects of my fieldwork experience, identifying any hidden agendas or prejudices on my part and trying to understand my entanglement with my research sites and subjects in order to gain some distance from them.

The most conventional technique associated with ethnography is participant observation. According to Tedlock (2000) and Davies (???), the traditional anthropological ethnography in which full participation was seen as both the ultimate achievement and a sign of having 'gone native', has undergone significant modification. As Tedlock points out, ethnographers' use of participant observation is now far more likely to involve 'observing participation', than actually taking part in the everyday activities they seek to understand. According to Davies, participation, where it does take place, is more often used as a way to facilitate observation so that 'more meaningful discussion' can take place. My experience of working in the field suggested that the key to the issues that interested me was in the doing, the participating – 'immersing' myself through involvement in the existing activities and practices of everyday schooling. School-based ethnographers have tended to conduct classroom observation, sometimes as neutral or even invisible observers, sometimes positioning themselves in relation either to the pupils or the teacher (e.g. see Morris-Roberts 2001). While I also observed teaching practice, I found teachers reluctant to be observed and felt that my presence presented an additional burden for them, as well as being an additional distraction to the pupils. It was also easy, and quite common in the literature, to use observational opportunities to identify problems in particular teaching practices and to point to areas for improvement. In order to avoid such objectifying practices I chose to position myself in the teaching or facilitating role and to examine some of the interactions from the perspective of the facilitator. In this sense, I was not just asking individuals to participate in the life of my research but was also actively participating in the daily life of the school.

This strategy added an additional dimension to my research in that it placed me at the centre of some of the interactions I sought to document, and sometimes directly in the firing line. And it often felt like exactly that: target practice, in which I was the target, not only for pupils but also for teachers; and I would leave the session, the school, the meeting, feeling useless and dejected. Davies (1999) highlights some of the difficulties of conducting fully participatory research, including the tendency to become too involved in the considerations of staff and missing out on the nature of interactions that are only visible to an observer. It was certainly true that at times I was so preoccupied with the task of being a 'good' teacher or delivering a 'good' session that I undoubtedly

missed out on aspects of the interaction that would have been evident to a more 'dispassionate' observer. I also often felt like I had got nothing, no useful material, no earth-shattering insights, only more paperwork to complete and more revisions to make for next time. It was only after moving away from the classroom, the school, the social networks that I was able to look at the material again and to think perhaps about how these experiences might lead to insights of their own. In particular, how becoming 'too involved' was itself a product of the particular relations of schooling that I was keen to document.

According to Davies (ibid.), one of the ways to overcome the difficulties of fully participatory research is to combine it with other methods that require different levels of participation. In addition to conducting participant observation in the conventional sense, and participating fully in the way described above, I also conducted a series of open and semi-structured interviews with teachers, support staff and pupils, as well as open discussion groups with between two and ten pupils. The pupils who participated were primarily drawn from the projects I conducted with other learning mentors and the discussions revolved around their participation in projects as well as their experiences in the classroom. As described in the previous section, conducting research in this way provided an opportunity to reflect on a number of different experiences and on the ways in which staff and pupils responded to discussions about sex/uality in different contexts. This method can be seen as a form of triangulation, a way of evaluating the correspondence between behaviour and responses of individuals in different environments. But it also performed another function: illustrating the complexity of the emotions associated with the discussion of sex/uality in schools, including the difficult and often antagonist relationships between staff, and the mechanisms used to conceal the antagonism. Similarly, talking to pupils as well as standing in front of them in class brought home how difficult many pupils found this dynamic and the lengths to which they would go to construct less vulnerable personas.

Any decision about how best to access research material must also be accompanied by a consideration of the ethics of gathering data in a given way. With the rapid expansion in youth research and the emphasis on participation and empowerment, there has been a heightened awareness and increased weight given to ethical and legal considerations.

Many of the issues raised in feminist research are seen to have an increased significance in youth research as young people are seen to lack the resources, social networks and knowledgability of those conducting the research (Cieslik 2003:2). While there are some areas of clarity given by the law, and ethical guidelines laid down by institutions and organisations such as the British Sociological Association, there are still a number of grey areas when it comes to putting ethics in to practice. As France (2004) highlights, the law is not always ethical and cannot give guidance on what is right and wrong in each situation (p.180).

One of the first principles of youth research is that the participants agree to take part and do so with a full understanding of what it is they have agreed to, that is, the principle of informed consent. But, according to France (2004), young people are often not the givers of consent in practice, as access to the field must initially be granted by the gate-keepers of that site and, in some cases, also by parents. As Morris-Roberts (2001) points out, working in a school where adults have authority can make it very difficult for young people to opt out of research (in the case of classroom observation for example). This can be further complicated by the less direct ways in which young people may exercise choice in practice, irrespective of formal measures that are put in to place (for example, see Morris-Roberts 2001 for a discussion of the role of friendship groups). This indicates the complicated nature of ethics and the impossibility of relying solely on guidelines. I found ethical choices easy to make on paper but much more complex to navigate in practice.

All of the recorded material used in this thesis was recorded with written and verbal consent from the young people involved. In the case of younger pupils, in Years 7 and 8, I also obtained written consent from parents. Each request for consent from pupils was also accompanied by a discussion, initiated by me, about the nature and role of social research and how they, as participants, could think about and manage their personal boundaries. As already suggested in this chapter, while this process was significant in terms of gauging how 'informed' their consent was, pupils were generally pretty uninterested in the wider project of research itself. With some of the older pupils I attempted to engage in a discussion about why young peoples' views were considered important and what they thought might be the impact of their views on a wider level, but this was also not fruitful. My overriding feeling was that any pupil enthusiasm for

participating in the discussions was much more to do with the fact that we would be talking about sex and that I was someone who had a reputation for having *those* kinds of discussions in the school. In some cases, talking with me also meant that they were *not* somewhere else, so that agreeing to take part was also an opportunity to relieve boredom or to escape unpopular activities. In such circumstances I could ensure that I had ticked all the appropriate boxes, but I still had to use my own judgement about when and how to intervene. It was not a question of following procedures but of recognising boundaries and balancing the needs of my research with the needs of individuals. Agreeing to take part in research does not mean that young people will always feel comfortable with the way they have behaved during a session, or feel happy afterwards with what they said. Ethical practice often meant identifying moments when pupils needed to be steered away from the personal in order to avoid negative feelings about the interaction later on. While some pupils were eager in theory to have their real names used in the research, in practice they could have no idea how they would be represented and therefore all names have been changed as a matter of course.

There are also encounters described in this thesis which were not recorded and for which neither parental, teacher nor pupil consent was secured. As already stated, the focus of my research is on different environments in schools in which staff and pupils engage with issues of sexuality. Some of those contexts, such as one-to-one sessions with Learning Mentors or Connexions Advisors, could not be recorded or observed for obvious ethical reasons and are explored instead through interviews conducted with members of support staff in Chapter 3. Although other contexts had less direct ethical implications for individuals, for practical reasons it was not possible to obtain consent in all of the environments in which I was placed. This is the case in Chapter 4 for example, where I describe an encounter with an experienced teacher that I was working with as part of a teacher-training programme. In this situation the teachers involved in the programme were already being scrutinised by the 'sex experts' and their classes were adapting to having an 'outsider' present in their lessons. For many of the reasons outlined by research in Chapter 1, these situations were already tense and strained and would not have been made any easier – and might have been made inaccessible – by the actual presence of a researcher. My intention was not to 'infiltrate' an environment, nor expose anyone or anything, but to use my access to these contexts to reflect on some of the broader social and theoretical issues. To use Britzman's terms (1995), while those

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involved were actual persons, 'my intent was not to represent their actuality' (p.232). Recognising my difficult position in these instances, I ensured that the narrative was constructed in such a way as to depersonalise the individuals and the location and to place myself at the centre of the interaction. In this way my aim was to incorporate aspects of those experiences which I felt were significant at a wider level without jeopardising the right of individuals to consent to their involvement in research. The role of inscription in addressing these issues is something which is discussed further in this chapter.

According to Cieslik (2003) there is a more general ethical issue facing youth researchers which does not relate to the experience of its young subjects. This is about recognising the ways in which academic research is implicated in wider discourses about youth and young people. Historically, he argues, youth studies has had a predilection for studying 'spectacular' young people and this can contribute to 'a subtle yet pervasive popular discourse about the lives of young people today – that somehow most are either "in trouble" or "causing trouble"' (p.5). Many of the everyday lives of the young people I worked with would appear 'spectacular' when printed out of context – on the front page of a daily newspaper, for example – especially if they happened to coincide with a current moral panic or sensationalised news story. As anyone who works in education or social work would confirm, all inner-city schools contain elements of society's worst fears; this is not a spectacular fact, but a consequence of the diverse communities they draw from and the nature of city life in the twenty-first century. Sex/uality in adolescence easily qualifies as a 'spectacular' issue in the public sense, I am reminded of this almost every time I am asked to explain the topic of my thesis. While I can appreciate the sensationalist nature of studying 'teenage kicks', as someone put it, seen from a different perspective, my research is just the exploration of a mundane, inevitable part of school life and growing up. If researchers are not to be dictated to by media agendas, they have a responsibility to be faithful to the context of the stories they document. This means looking for the banal in the 'spectacular' but it may also mean turning an investigative eye on areas of school life that individuals would not necessarily choose to have portrayed themselves. This is really a matter of being responsible in the selection and documentation of individual 'stories'. This is the subject of the last section of this chapter.

The ethnographic text

As described earlier, ethnography is as much about the analysis and inscription of research material as it is about the way in which that material is collected. According to Van Maanen (1995) the research process only *becomes* an ethnography when the final product can be labelled as such. Many of the issues raised in relation to the research process, and the efforts to affect or at least be aware of the power relations inherent within it, are also evident in debates about the way in which data is interpreted and represented. Much has been written about a 'crisis of representation' in the light of postmodern and poststructural critiques of realist epistemology and there is an ongoing concern with the extent to which ethnographers can claim to 'know' the social world. According to Britzman (1995), poststructuralist concerns with the relative and discursive nature of social phenomena disturb the ethnographer's confidence in 'knowing' experience or in possessing the writerly power to do anything else but 'borrow discourses and tack them onto other discourses' (p.232). From this perspective, ethnographic texts are 'secondhand stories' (ibid., p.233), partial, discursive constructions which serve to produce versions of the reality they seek to document (Popoviciu, et al. 2006).

When it comes to interpreting data, writers from a poststructuralist perspective often talk about 'giving up', 'rejecting' 'abandoning' classic ethnographic aims and objectives where ethnographic interpretation becomes a process of uncertainty, doubt and constraint. But according to Morley (1997), the consequence of the 'crisis of representation' should not be a rejection of the project of representation, but *better* representation. From this perspective, poststructuralist critiques offer an opportunity to rethink the claims made by ethnographic writing and to acknowledge its historical and contextual contingency. Many have held on firmly to the pursuit of realist representation at the same time as recognising the impossibility of ever fully achieving its objective. As Morley (1997) describes, the burden of responsibility is not any less because the representation is partial and selective. There is still a need to try to represent the social world as faithfully as possible with the tools and resources that are available.

My approach to ethnographic writing has undoubtedly been influenced by what Tedlock (2000) refers to as 'narrative ethnography', a style of writing in which the reader is made aware of the character and process of the ethnographic dialogue through the experiences of the ethnographer (ibid.). This can be seen as part of a growing trend in ethnographic writing which foregrounds personal narratives, described by Reed-Danahay (2001) as not so much autobiographical, as 'autoethnographical'. As Reed-Danahay points out, the increasing emphasis on reflexivity and self-disclosure is seen by some to be 'narcissistic' and 'egotistical', where the private lives and personal concerns of the researcher come to occupy a greater significance than the subject of the research. But there are also many examples of 'narrative' ethnography which have not fallen into this trap and use a more literary style to encapsulate the atmosphere, sense and feeling of an interaction without losing sight of the object of study. According to Behar (1996), self exposure must not be for its own sake, a 'decorative flourish', but must 'take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise go' (p.4). This points to the role of self-narration not as the negation of authorial responsibility, but as having something distinct and important to contribute to the story being told. When it came to interpreting my data I found it impossible to reflect on my research encounters without thinking about how I felt during those moments. This was not just about the process of doing research but how I felt about particular individuals and my interactions with them. Both Walkerdine et al. (2001) and Holloway and Jefferson (ibid.) draw on psychoanalytic theories of transference and counter-transference to explore the experiences and emotional response of the researcher. They make the bold and very effective move of weaving the emotional experience, and the subsequent analysis of that experience, into the ethnographic text. According to Youell (2006), it is precisely this capacity to examine one's own 'emotional baggage' which distinguishes psychoanalytically-informed observation from other ways of listening, observing and reflecting (p.31). Unlike these and other authors, I do not have a grounding in psychoanalytic theory nor was I in analysis before or during the time of my research. I was however, greatly influenced by texts in my field that incorporated aspects of psychoanalytic theory as a way to analyse and inscribe the relationships and experiences of schooling. My application of psychoanalytic ideas is only tentative but it is part of a wider commitment to presenting myself in the text, where I was always present in the encounter. The aim is not to be self-indulgent, but to be transparent and critical about whom the person was

that pupils and teachers were responding to, in order that the response might be better understood.

In light of these considerations, each of the chapters begins by outlining the context of the material contained in that chapter, my role within the collection of that data and in relation to the people contained within the account. This has two functions; to be transparent about my positioning in relation to how the data was collected and the status given to the voices in those encounters. And secondly to foreground what the position I adopt in relation to the context has to say about the context itself. That is, what did being in that role mean in terms of how pupils and teachers were able to relate to me, what this says about the kinds of contexts and relationships that are available in schools, and what the implications are in terms of possible communication practices around the sexual. In this way the reader can begin to think about how my experience might relate to the experience of other teachers, educators and researchers working in schools.

The material chosen for each chapter is designed to illustrate the key themes that arose during my research and to reflect the different positions I occupied as a researcher. I was aware that this was a subjective and edited process and that in selecting my material I was making a conscious choice to tell a particular kind of story. Rather than attempting to disguise the editing process, I have embraced it as an opportunity to tell a those stories at the same time as recognising the political implications of doing so. McRobbie (2007) for example, expresses her disillusionment with ethnographies of girlhood and what she describes as their 'celebratory' nature. She sees ethnographers as trying to compensate for negative media portrayals by presenting girls as resilient, progressive and awe-inspiring rather than illustrating what she describes as the pain and tragedy of young womens' experiences. In line with what McRobbie describes, I was conscious of the tendency, and in some cases the desire, to present my young subjects in positive and affirming ways. There was much pain and disappointment in my encounters in the schools and I found myself hanging on to the moments of pleasure and satisfaction as indicative of the fact that it was not all as bad as it seemed. But, conscious of my own needs in this respect, I have tried to represent as far as possible the diversity of these interactions. This includes the difficult, and at times futile, struggles made by both young people and adults to communicate about sexuality, to make sense of the sexual world, to strive for positive sexual experiences, and to present themselves

in ways which concealed their anxieties and confusion. There were moments of optimism, but there were many, many moments in which I felt like the whole enterprise was doomed to failure.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have addressed some of the key issues I faced in attempting to conduct and construct a youth ethnography. I have described how my experience was shaped by a changing political and theoretical climate which emphasises the rights of young people and privileges their voices and participation in all areas of research. I used the concepts of participation and empowerment to illustrate the extent to which this has become not just the acceptable face of youth research but a symbol of its emancipatory and 'democratic' potential. While recognising the positive aspects of this shift I made an argument for an approach to youth research which also questions some of its boundaries. This is an argument for youth research that recognises the human-ness of being young, including the complexities involved in managing the social world and social relationships (including the research relationship) and the relevance of being difficult, taking risks and getting things wrong. I have argued that we need to be cautious about the language used to describe 'good' practice in research and to be aware of what may be concealed behind that language. Not least because the current focus on the positive experience of young participants often obscures some of the equally important if uncomfortable aspects of their behaviour. This is an argument for greater transparency about the practical realities of working with young people and for seeing some of the less convenient encounters as part of the research process. To engage with and look to the explanatory power of ambiguity and contradiction does not mean letting go of the relatively recent emancipatory project, but it does mean looking at it with open eyes, that is, with a commitment to taking young peoples' voices and experiences seriously but also insisting on engaging with them critically. I am arguing therefore for a respect for young people's voices and the stories they tell, but within a realistic framework that recognises the 'temporary, insecure and incomplete' nature of the social relationship of research (Geertz 2000).

Research with young people demands greater ethical responsibility than it does with adults, bound up as it is with legitimate anxieties about legality, the exploitation of minors and of the imbalance in the knowledge/power relationship. As research

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indicates, there are many ways in which researchers can adapt their research methods to take account of the specific needs and vulnerabilities of their research group, minimising the potential for harm, while still allowing important stories to be told. As I have suggested in relation to my own research, ethical practice is not just about ticking all the right boxes but involves maintaining respect for the situations in which participants are placed.

Chapter 3

'*Everybody's* dread lesson of the week'?: Teachers, support staff and the SRE divide

Introduction

In this chapter, the teaching of SRE is examined as one of a number of different ways in which pupils receive education about sex/uality in schools. As highlighted in Chapter 1, recent shifts in education policy, and initiatives aimed at tackling low attainment and social exclusion, have meant that school populations are increasingly composed of staff responsible not just for academic progress, but for pupils' welfare and personal development. This has led to increased diversity in the way adults work with young people in schools and in the kinds of relationships pupils are likely to encounter. This chapter is an exploration of some of those relationships and of the different interactions they facilitate. Using interviews and observational data from my research, it explores how different members of staff, and different kinds of staff, understand their role in relation to pupils' sexual learning as well as how they experience that role. In doing so it asks; how do professional roles and identities shape how different members of staff approach issues of sex/uality? And, what resources or what forms of 'cultural capital' are drawn on in order to make those relationships 'work'?

The material in this chapter is drawn from interviews with four teachers (Grace, Selma, Aileen, Mary) and four members of support staff (Karen, Sarah, Graham, Anita). These are a small sample of the interviews carried out during my fieldwork and have been selected to illustrate a range of subject positions and experiences. Besides Graham, all of the staff were from Charlesford School and were all familiar to me in some capacity prior to the interview. Anita and Sarah in particular, had been good friends as well as colleagues and we had worked closely together for the previous four years. Graham was a Lead Learning Mentor at Bard Community School whom I had met socially prior to the interview and was a close personal friend of Anita. This familiarity had an impact on the ways in which the issues were discussed. Aware that I shared their experience of being positioned on the margins of school life, the support staff talked at length about their experiences and were candid about their relationship with teaching staff and the formal structures of the school. This open approach contrasted with the

guarded stance that was taken by the teachers – something that was partly indicative of the internal tensions surrounding the delivery of PSHE at that time. Having worked at the school, I knew how intimately entwined PSHE was with professional allegiances, friendship groups and feelings about individual members of staff. Teachers were at least as mindful of how they spoke about other teachers as they were about how they spoke about themselves.

The first section of this chapter focuses on the interviews with teachers. Using short portraits, I outline the different ways in which individuals talk about their concerns and how personal commitments are balanced alongside professional ones. Drawing on Zembylas' discussion (2003) of the construction of the 'teacher-self', I examine the constraints and the opportunities that SRE presents for teachers to adopt alternative subjectivities. This theme is continued in the second half of the chapter where I look at support staff experiences and the kind of professional 'self' that support staff construct. In the final section, I look at both teachers and support staff in relation to several theoretical concepts from the work of Peirre Bourdieu. The concept of *habitus* is used here to think about the kinds of dispositions, language, values, and embodied practice that support staff draw on to build more informal relationships with pupils. I also consider the different forms of cultural capital that teachers and support staff draw on to make sense of their roles and how these roles are received, or *legitimised*, by pupils. This is considered alongside a notion of *value* to examine the factors that shape this kind of 'identity work'.

Teachers' experiences of SRE

At Charlesford School, SRE was delivered through the traditional 'form tutor' model. Each class tutor had to deliver one lesson of PSHE per week, of which some component during the year would be of SRE. Working in a number of different schools during and preceding my research, it had become clear just how varied the models of SRE provision were, both locally and nationally. Some schools had designated pastoral teams made up of specially trained teachers, while others offered no consistent model of SRE provision at all. Under current legislation, the only stipulation is that schools must produce a written SRE policy, drafted in consultation with their Board of Governors. As a consequence, the actual practice and quality of delivery tends to vary considerably, both within and between schools (Atkinson 2002; Biddulph 2006; Buston et al. 2002;

Strange et al. 2006). In Charlesford School, there were no 'specialist' teachers or training courses and PSHE occupied a space in the school timetable that was continually cut short by long assemblies or competing tasks. As with many other schools in the area, SRE was not a priority.

There was no time when I was working in Charlesford School or talking to staff that I was not given the impression that sex education was a problem. Raising the topic was met with sighs, a rolling of eyes or a facial expression or comment that implied that it was something that was tolerated and survived rather than enjoyed or valued. In one staff meeting, at which the SRE text book was being distributed for use the following week, there was an unspoken but universal apprehension that *that* book, and *that* time of year, had come round again. Looking round the table, it seemed from the silence and sideways glances that this was not considered to be a shared ordeal worthy of a few jokes, but one in which each individual was on their own. Equally universal amongst those teachers I spoke to, was a sense in which this response was inadequate; that they were, in some way, letting their pupils down as a result. The desire to provide the right kind of information and the right kind of support for their pupils was clear. But it did not fit with the experiences the teachers described or the situation they saw themselves in.

During the interviews, it became apparent that talking about SRE amounted to talking about how this contradictory position was survived; how ideals and opinions about how SRE *should* be delivered were balanced against the practical challenge of actually having to do it. As each of the portraits illustrates, the extent to which such concerns were prohibitive varied widely, with some teachers choosing to persevere while others found ways to avoid SRE completely. These different approaches reflect the individual nature of teachers' responses but also the ways that practical context and professional expectations shaped what was deemed achievable.

Grace was coming to the end of her NQT (Newly Qualified Teacher) year at the school and was about to take up a full-time post as a geography teacher the following September. She had some experience as a co-tutor during her NQT year but it was only with her new job that she had been charged with delivering PSHE. She was both optimistic and apprehensive about her new responsibility for teaching one 50-minute

lesson of PSHE per week to a Year-10 class. In her mid twenties, with measured but evident enthusiasm, Grace felt that SRE had the potential to open up new kinds and new levels of communication with her pupils. This was based on her belief that talking openly about sex was an important part of her role as a teacher and that she had something to offer her pupils. She was very open with me during the interview and spoke freely about her own experiences of growing up, as well as her reflections on her sexual learning as an adult. This gave the impression of someone who felt comfortable with the material and who was happy to address sensitive issues. As she made clear from the start of the interview, this confidence did not extend to talking about it as part of SRE. Her trepidation is illustrated in the following extract, in which Grace describes her feelings about teaching SRE for the first time:

> G: It's something I feel quite nervous about, um…I think…yeah, I feel in a way nervous
> about teaching them anyway because I know they're quite…sort of a difficult class and
> although I know them very well I know them like – because I haven't actually ever taught
> them PSHE, it's a bit, it's still a different role to a tutor actually *teaching* PSHE, isn't it?
> PH: Mmm…
> G:… and I think actually moving into that role, like I feel somewhat nervous about it. Um, I
> think talking about relationships, like although I have spoken to some of them individually just
> because they come to me at lunchtime or whatever and they talk about things and I'm
> completely happy with that, but I think the idea of kind of being in front of a whole class I find
> quite intimidating.

While comfortable with the subject matter, Grace was not comfortable with the context in which she was expected to talk about it. In her role as co-tutor, she had some experience of talking informally with pupils and valued the trust this engendered, but this was seen to be inadequate preparation for the more 'intimidating' spectre of whole-class teaching. The prospect of facing what she knew to be 'a difficult class' left her anxious about how her own efforts to address the issues would be received. Her unease was related to the behaviour of particular pupils but also to her sense of being under-qualified to address those issues in the class environment. With no specialist training, Grace described feeling 'totally unprepared' by her PGCE and as if she had 'not been guided in any way' during her year at the school. While remaining positive about the potential benefits of SRE, she was clearly anxious about how she was to realise those benefits in practice.

It is clear from her hesitant response in this extract, that Grace was still unsure about what this 'new role' actually entailed. As highlighted by Evans and Evans (2007), teaching any aspect of PSHE can be a 'baptism of fire' for many NQTs, as few have the opportunity to gain practical experience of it before they are given responsibility for delivering it. Grace's descriptions of the benefits she felt it could have in terms of having 'adult discussions' and pupils 'learning from each other', illustrated her commitment to an open dialogue about sex. But equally clear – and not least to Grace herself – was that a positive attitude and open approach were not sufficient to realise this goal on their own. With some experience of this particular class, she had already identified the lesson as a potential site of conflict. As described by Kehily (2002), pupils do not always respond positively to teachers' efforts to form more familiar bonds, and Grace was unsure about how they would react to her in this more informal role. The tension between wanting to deliver effective SRE and managing the conflict and antagonism it could well provoke had left Grace feeling vulnerable and exposed.

The problems anticipated by Grace were more than familiar to Selma, a specialist SEN (Special Educational Needs) teacher with over 20 years of experience. For Selma, delivering SRE was not just about being comfortable with the issues, it was also about being able to manage pupils' behaviour appropriately. Selma's competence and enthusiasm for talking openly about sex was something for which she was well known, both in terms of her humorous banter with staff members and her ability to address Child Protection cases. Her forward approach was not shared (nor always appreciated) by all staff but it was an obvious benefit when it came to dealing with the more challenging aspects of sex/uality in the classroom. To be effective, Selma felt that SRE needed to provide pupils with 'as much knowledge and information as we can impart' and to take it 'as far as they're interested'. Selma was well aware of the difficulty this presented to many teachers and felt that it was not something that all teachers could be expected to do:

> S: There are teachers that.... I suppose they're ... trying to put your finger on it, if it's not
> something they're open and comfortable discussing how can they be expected to be open and
> comfortable discussing it with a bunch of just girls? ...Um..., So I worry about the
> differences in delivery across the school... because there'll be those that are open and

comfortable and think that, yes these youngsters need to know as much as possible. And there'll be teachers who are shy, and... and reluctant, and ... I wonder what happens then...?

In this extract, Selma identifies a number of teachers' personal difficulties with SRE but is careful to make this neither a personal nor a professional issue. She indicates her concern about the kind of provision – or lack of it – that many pupils receive, but holds back from offering any concrete solutions. Her approach is concerned but pragmatic, asserting that teachers are either comfortable with the issues and are able to address them, or they are not. This reflects the biographical approach to teaching which suggests that teachers' biographies and personal experiences shape the pedagogic styles they adopt (Gilber 2007; Kehily 2002). According to Gilber (2007), we tend to underestimate the personal challenges, and therefore the professional burden, that teachers encounter when obliged to address their feelings and attitudes towards sexuality. As someone with a lot of experience with SRE, Selma was well aware of just how difficult and personally challenging having an 'open and honest' approach could sometimes be. As a gay woman, she had on occasion found herself on the receiving end of personal questions and abusive comments from pupils. Rather than seeing these challenges as a reason to avoid issues of sex/uality, she saw them as 'part of the territory' and something that teachers had to be able to get past in order to tackle the issues in greater depth. In this sense, it is not just a case of being comfortable with the issues but of being competent in handling the personal impact of the behaviour that often came with it.

For those less comfortable with the material, other strategies were necessary for managing the weekly task. While a biographical approach suggests that an ability to talk openly about sex is a necessary prerequisite to effective SRE, this was not always upheld by the evidence in the classroom. Aileen, like Selma, had been teaching PSHE for more than 20 years with no specialist training. But, unlike Selma, she did not feel confident about her ability to address sensitive issues and certainly did not consider herself an expert. She made no attempt to disguise the fact that she found many of the topics in PSHE difficult, and talked about all aspects of its delivery as an ongoing struggle. But alongside these difficulties, she also expressed a strong sense of commitment to her pupils and a desire to try to meet their needs as best she could. Over the previous four years, she had developed a strategy that allowed her to work around

her weaknesses while still meeting their needs. Mirroring the peer-education model (although more out of necessity than design), she had been assisting her pupils to design and deliver lessons on those topics she did not feel confident to teach. She believed that they would 'probably do it a lot better' than she would. This approach had been very popular with her pupils and its results were admired and indeed envied by other members of staff. While Aileen described her experience of PSHE overall as fairly negative, she was clearly proud and confident in terms of this approach.

Her commitment to her pupils and her years of experience in the school meant that Aileen had no qualms about unilaterally opting for peer-led SRE lessons. When asked why other teachers had not followed her lead, Aileen replied (with some resignation) that this model had not been taken up because teachers were 'very slow to change' and tended to feel 'safer' with what they knew. The sense of 'pulling together' that is identified by Buston et al. (2001:363) as fundamental, was entirely absent from Aileen's portrayal of the pastoral team she was part of. She presents SRE as a uniformly challenging area for teachers, one in which they lack the necessary expertise:

> A: The problem with PSHE is that it is not delivered by experts, and it's a very expert sensitive thing in many cases. Because we don't feel that we are experts in the content then, I mean ... I find it very hard. Um, I think a lot of teachers find it very hard, it's their, it's everybody's *dread* lesson of the week because we ... we're not experts. Um, and it's very easy to say, 'get on with your coursework', that's by far the easiest thing to say. [Whispers in a confidential way] *I'll be saying it next year in Year 11 as well!* [Laughs]

What was striking about Aileen's case was that, even with her success, she presented her approach as more of a strategy of survival than a positive contribution. She made it clear that it was assumed by most staff that PSHE would be a failure and something to be avoided wherever possible. As she describes in this extract, it was preferable to distract pupils with unrelated tasks such as getting on with coursework, than to routinely set oneself up to fail. The attitude she described amongst teachers suggested that it was not just a lack of status and training that they contended with, but also the negative culture around SRE that had taken root amongst staff. Aileen was able to refer to her coping strategies in a jokey way because of her status as an experienced member of staff, and because she did not entirely feel as if her own attempts had been a failure. As

she alludes to in the above extract, not all teachers could afford such a light-hearted approach and many clearly continued to struggle on in silence.

Despite their concerns, Grace, Selma and Aileen demonstrated a preparedness to try to salvage something from an intrinsically difficult situation; but the willingness to 'make do' was not something that was universally shared. Of all of the staff I spoke to, Mary was the most negative about her experience of SRE and the most vehement in her response. As a science teacher and Head of Department, she saw herself as having significant expertise when it came to sex education. As a feminist and an active socialist, she also saw herself as having a strong commitment to equipping female pupils with the tools that would enable them to make informed choices about their lives. However, she was unable to draw successfully on these convictions in the context of PSHE. Her experience of PSHE was negative to the point where she felt 'disempowered' and had given up trying. For Mary, the problem was unequivocally one of structure; of not having the tools to do the job properly. As the only area of the national curriculum where aspects of sex and sexuality were compulsory, she made a point of showing me how the resources for the science department were organised and where teachers could go if they wanted help with teaching any topic. This was something, she claimed, that did not exist for PSHE. Unlike Aileen and Selma, she was not willing to adapt or lower her high standards for her own teaching in order to do her best with limited means.

> **M**: Well we're science so we teach it as part of science, um, and a lot of people say it should be purely biological in science but I don't agree. I think you can't talk about those issues without allowing students to raise questions and also to raise issues with them. I mean we teach it in Year 7, and obviously you deal with it in a Year-7 sort of way, and we also would come across it later in 'Inheritance and Selection' and as soon as you start talking about mothers and fathers you are going to start talking about relationships and students are going to raise questions. And so I would always, I have no problem at all of talking to students about anything, anything they want to raise it doesn't bother me, if I know the answer that's fine. Um, I sometimes think I scare them a little bit (laughs) because I will answer anything – not if they're being silly obviously – but I've got no problem with teaching it in science.

The picture Mary presents of herself as a science teacher is one of competence and composure. She illustrates her level of expertise by outlining the specificity of her

knowledge and her willingness to engage students beyond the requirements of the national curriculum. She identified herself as someone who was comfortable with the material, to the extent that she may even 'scare' pupils with her level of openness.

But her experience of PSHE is one in which her usual approach does not 'work'. The problematic nature of this shift from her 'own territory' of science, to the arena of PSHE is not attributed to issues of content (unlike with Grace and Aileen), but to PSHE's low standing as something outside of the National Curriculum. She presents a number of possible explanations as to why her skills are not transferable and repeatedly stresses the importance of giving PSHE the status it deserves. This is all delivered with an undisguised exasperation that she is forced to work under such conditions.

> **M**: It just doesn't work, I walk in there and it just doesn't work. I know there are some
> people who are extremely good at it and you know, we should use those people as role models
> and whatever, and there are things that will work with students you know, like, if you have the
> right kind of stimulus and the right kind of debate set up then it will work, there's no doubt
> about that. But, it's.. its sort of ... my ... my honest way of being with it is that I will go in
> there and I know that if I don't prepare something really good for it then it's not going to
> work, but I don't prepare something really good for it because I don't really know what to
> prepare because I don't really have a scheme to work from. [Laughs wearily] That maybe
> sounds like a lot of excuses but ...

Mary saw the school's lack of basic structure and organisation in relation to PSHE as actively obstructing her from performing at her best. The tip-toeing around individuals and internal school tensions evident in other interviews were flagrantly disregarded in Mary's case. She stated categorically that she did not care who knew how she felt. She volunteered during the interview that she avoided teaching PSHE whenever possible and was 'happy as Larry' that she had escaped the responsibility for that academic year. This position was an expression of defiance but also of defeat. The loss of control she described in her role as a PSHE teacher was clearly an uncomfortable and demoralising experience and marked a significant departure from her normal experience as a science teacher. Unlike Aileen and Selma, providing pupils with whatever kind of input she could manage was not compatible with her understanding of her role as a professional.

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Professional identity and the construction of a 'teacher-self'

The narratives presented in this section illustrate many of the issues that were raised in the literature discussed in Chapter 1. All four of the interviews show that talking about sex/uality in the context of SRE was seen as qualitatively different from other teaching roles and responsibilities. It was seen to offer unique challenges, both in terms of its content and the context in which it was to be delivered. The professional marginalisation of SRE is evident in the inadequacy of Grace's teaching course. Selma, Aileen and Mary all point to a lack of resources, training and support. As identified by Strange et al. (2006), such hurdles can decrease the motivation and enthusiasm amongst many of the teachers and can contribute to a general culture of apathy and negativity within the staff group. As stated at the start of this section, schools adopt very different models for SRE. How successful they are, according to Buston et al. (2001), depends very much on the motivation and ethos of the staff responsible for SRE provision. It was clear from the interviews that these teachers felt that SRE had been made a low priority at Charlesford School and that provision was poorly managed and, consequently, poorly delivered. While careful not to name any names, it was evident that the motivation and skills of certain individuals were seen to be at fault.

What was less clear, however, was how personal and professional factors contributed to how obstacles were managed. Research has suggested that SRE benefits from a more informal approach and that teachers should only be selected who feel comfortable with and have the skills to address the material (Buston et al. 2002). As highlighted in all of the above cases, tailoring lessons in this way was often difficult in practice. Grace's youthful enthusiasm and openness did not mean that she was necessarily able to handle the behavioural challenges of some of the more demanding pupils. Similarly, while Aileen did not express the same confidence with the material as Mary and Selma, she nonetheless managed to find a strategy that was very popular with her pupils. As Mary described, making it 'work' was not just about being open about sex or being more familiar with pupils. Rather, success was determined by a contingency of factors that were much less tangible.

One of the explanations for these difficulties lies in the ways that individual teachers understand their professional identities. According to Zembylas (2003), teachers are

generally assumed to possess a consistent identity, a 'teacher-self', that is coherent and autonomous. Adopting a poststructuralist framework, he insists that these identities are not fixed but are assigned to teachers through the discourses, practices and performances that constitute the everyday practice of teaching. In their daily interactions, teachers learn to internalise and enact the roles and norms assigned to them by the school culture; a culture that privileges emotional self-discipline and regulates behaviour through prescribed 'emotional rules'.

In this way, teachers are 'produced' as particular kinds of professionals. The ways that these rules 'governed' emotions was evident in the descriptions of individual experiences in the classroom. Selma, for example, was very measured in her assessment of the 'problem' of uneven provision in schools. She was careful not to suggest that it in any way interfered with the general running of the school. Aileen, in contrast, found that she was continually having to temper her own excitement and the pleasure she got out of a 'really good lesson' because it did not fit with the prescribed emotional response amongst the rest of the staff group. As described by Zembylas, Aileen's use of an alternative pedagogy had indeed marked her out as 'different' and she had learnt to keep her enthusiasm for her unorthodox approach, to herself (p.121). She was aware of the kind of 'emotion management' that was needed in forums such as year-team meetings, where she concealed her feelings of achievement and satisfaction in front of others. In this sense, the new kind of subjectivity she had been able to practice in her role as PSHE teacher was not compatible with the more stoical attitude that prevailed amongst the rest of the staff.

The contrast between Aileen's experience and that of the rest of the staff suggests that SRE can be both a potentially liberating and a potentially threatening space. It offers opportunities for teachers to explore alternative subjectivities that counteract dominant rules about emotional self-discipline and detachment. SRE provided Aileen with the opportunity to take risks with her pedagogic practice; risks that had a positive impact on her experience in the classroom and on her enthusiasm and motivation as a teacher. But it also had the potential to expose individuals by revealing the fragility of existing identities and by placing them in vulnerable positions. As Selma points out, talking to pupils about sex/uality requires a very different set of dispositions and skills; not least the ability to manage pupils' behaviour in a way that does not silence their views and

concerns. The loss of control described by Mary, or the fear of exposure described by Grace, highlight how negative and demoralising it can be for teachers when efforts fail. In Mary's case, placing herself in a position whereby she was forced to confront that failure was simply not an option.

Support staff and teachers: Contrasting responsibilities and backgrounds

As outlined in the introduction, one of the implications of recent government initiatives has been the recognition of learning as something that involves the emotional as well as the intellectual needs of pupils. As also described, this can be seen as creating an additional space or outlet in which the non-academic aspects of pupils' lives can be addressed. One of the key functions of Learning Mentors, as well as Connexions Advisors and School Counsellors, has been to provide a space in the school where pupils can talk more openly about themselves and the issues they are facing. While the range of activities within these roles is diverse, when it comes to engaging with pupils about sex/uality, there are a number of practical and professional factors that clearly distinguish the experiences of support staff from those of teachers.

The most obvious distinction is that, unlike support staff, teachers are responsible for delivering sex education in classes of up to 30 pupils as part of the school timetable[1]. In contrast, support staff tend to work primarily with individuals and small groups, outside of conventional classroom settings. Teachers are expected to address issues of sex/uality as part of a formal programme of SRE, while non-teaching staff are likely to encounter sexual themes in a much less structured way. Contact with a Learning Mentor for example, generally consists of a weekly individual 'appointment' in a quiet, private room within the school. In Charlesford School, Learning Mentors and Teaching Assistants were also involved in running a number of lunchtime 'clubs' or sessions, some of which were connected to academic learning, such as the Debating Society and Homework Club, while others addressed social and emotional needs: the Turkish Girls Group, Young Carers Group, and the peer-mentoring project SISTAZ (discussed in Chapters 6 and 7). During my time as a mentor, I also taught eight lessons a week to groups of Year-10 and Year-11 students who were at risk of permanent exclusion or disaffection. In this sense, what qualifies as 'support' is both flexible and diverse and is

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[1] There are some cases in which support staff are directly involved in classroom teaching or team teaching for SRE, but this is not common practice.

related to the specific needs of pupils and the motivation of staff and management in individual schools.

There are other important factors that impact on how support staff work with pupils. The pathways into support work are often not through the conventional degree/post-graduation training route taken by teachers. As a result, support posts tend to draw people from a much wider variety of education and social backgrounds. The pay, hours of work and minimum qualifications required to be a Teaching Assistant for example, mean that posts attract a greater proportion of local people, and working class women in particular. All of the Teaching Assistants in Charlesford School at the time I was carrying out my research were local women, ex-pupils, or had their children in local schools. The convenience and familiarity of the workplace was one of the key attractions of the post. This had a significant impact on the way in which they related to pupils, in that they were often much more familiar with pupils' circumstances and in some cases, also their families. This sat in stark contrast to the predominantly middle-class composition of the teachers and senior managers, many of whom travelled significant distances across London (and in some cases from outside of London) to work in the school. In addition, policies of active recruitment mean that support staff in some schools are more likely to reflect the cultural, linguistic or ethnic make-up of the pupil population, where the criteria for working with pupils was related not to academic credentials, but to their ability to work with, and understand the needs of, particular communities. In this sense, they can often constitute a distinct group - not just in terms of their professional status but in terms of their social location. In all of the schools I worked in during my fieldwork, the support staff constituted a much more diverse group in terms of class, 'race' and sexuality, than the staff group as a whole.

There was a strange friction between teaching staff and Learning Mentors at Charlesford School. The Mentors' private spaces and flexible timetables meant that, for some teachers, it was considered to be an easy job. They were sometimes criticised for removing pupils from 'important' lessons, and there was more than a little envy expressed by some about their focus on group work and individual mentoring. This was generally light-hearted but I had myself been on the receiving end of comments from teachers about how 'nice' our resources were and how much time we seemed to have on our hands. While in no way excusable, it was possible to see where some of these

attitudes came from. Much of the work carried out by Learning Mentors existed outside of the school curriculum and was often invisible to other members of staff. Many of the day-to-day tasks involved working with external agencies or services and so a considerable amount of time was spent completing paper work, in supervision, or discussing confidential information about pupils within the team. In that sense, it was a very close as well as a closed group who relied on each other not just for professional but also for emotional support.

Support staff experiences of SRE: Openness and familiarity

Karen, a Learning Mentor had been in post for nearly a year. She was a local parent and an ex-pupil of the school and had an air of confidence that made her both popular among pupils and revered by them. She did not have any therapeutic training before taking up the post and did not adopt a typically therapeutic role with her pupils. Instead, her approach reflected her own interpretation of what supportive work should involve and her experience of trying to engage pupils on a personal level. As she describes below, knowing how to relate to pupils in this way was something she had to learn on the job:

> K: Um, I thought that would be done through talking in the sessions one to one [but] when I actually got here and arrived that materialised differently. It was more having to stretch them because they didn't even have the acknowledgement of how they actually felt you know? Sometimes similarly when you're an adult you actually can see how they felt, you've got the empathy, you understand what went wrong and where it went wrong, but realising when I actually got in to the role that the girls themselves didn't know. So it wasn't a case of simply them telling me how they felt, I was telling them how they can express it differently because from a grass-roots they didn't even know how they felt. And that was something I realised would be me changing my role into teaching them about feelings, it would then need more group work and not just one-to-one, sitting – 'what do you think now?' do you know what I mean? It evolved into something different and that's when I found that it got bigger, the role was bigger than, more intense than my first imagination of sitting down and just talking to somebody.

This extract illustrates some of the practical differences between the kind of work carried out by Learning Mentors and that carried out by teachers. While doing some non-curriculum teaching with reduced class sizes, Karen also worked with a caseload of individual pupils where she was responsible for assessing and addressing their

individual needs. As she describes above, this was not about 'just talking' as she had first imagined, but required the 'bigger ... more intense' task of trying to engage pupils in a process of understanding the self. Learning how to engage pupils in this way was seen by Karen to be a positive and enlightening experience. Without any therapeutic training, she described using her own experience of schooling and of knowing 'what girls are like' to try to interpret their needs. Not having been the easiest pupil herself, Karen felt that she understood pupils' difficult behaviour and was able to detach herself from the drama and the emotion that often came with it.

> K: I can laugh at myself as well as with others and I've always been quite comfortable, even when I was here at this school because I went to this school and girls can be quite venomous and you know, I was OK with that. So I know what girls are like, do you know what I mean? And sometimes it is the reaction that kind of got the fight going and got the chanting and got people on – 'I'm on *her* side' and... half the time when you walked away and said, hmmm, so? I'm very much like that anyway, I'm just like that, just like 'whatever, that's your thoughts'.

Karen's own experience as an ex-pupil and her familiarity with pupils' personal circumstances meant that she had a pragmatic and quite sanguine approach to their sexual behaviour. Her interpretation of pupils' attitudes towards sex, and their management of the different messages they received, were that they had come a long way in the 15 years since she was at the school. Contrary to most media messages, Karen saw pupils' behaviour in a positive light. In comparison to her own experience, she felt that they had a greater ability to assess their situation and to make decisions about their lives and their sexual behaviour than she had experienced at that age. This was linked to a greater understanding of, and confidence with, themselves as individuals and their relationship to each other. The insecurities and tensions around culture and race that she had experienced as a young black woman at the school in the 1980s was something she felt had been replaced by a better understanding and acceptance of the issues around difference. She saw pupils as 'reaching out for things' in their sexual development, but that they were doing so with a more sophisticated knowledge of the world and people around them.

Despite having no formal training, Karen talked about her role with a great deal of confidence and composure. She used her personal experience and familiarity with the

local context as a tool for working with pupils and establishing her authority. Sarah, a Lead Learning Mentor who had been working in the school for five years, also expressed a similar level of confidence when it came to talking about personal issues. Unlike Karen, Sarah was both trained and experienced in conducting therapeutic work with young people. But while she often used a psychoanalytic discourse to talk about her work this was never done in a way which suggested distance or superiority. A northern woman from a working-class background, Sarah was very upfront about all aspects of sex/uality in her interactions with adults and did not find the sexual behaviour of pupils either shocking or concerning. She was constantly frustrated by what she saw to be teachers ignoring or over-reacting to the sexual behaviour of pupils as a cause for concern in and of itself. Sarah's knowledge and training meant that she was able to combine a very down-to-earth interpretation of pupils' behaviour with a more in-depth analysis of its significance. As illustrated in the following extract, this enabled her to access aspects of pupils' lives that many teachers found challenging:

> S: What I've found right, is that girls want some honest information but they are embarrassed and they get scared off by the reprimands and reprisals from adults and I found just normalising the situation, and maybe speaking honestly about sex and saying – or putting the words into their mouths for them to make them feel that 'it's alright, I can talk about this'. Because I think it is a big feat, someone is not going to come up to you and say 'Oh I gave my boyfriend a blowjob and I don't know if I'm going to get pregnant now' – they're not going to do that. But I think you have to name it sometimes, you know like, when you have to ask girls 'Do you ever feel suicidal? Or self-harm?' You actually have to be quite direct because I think they appreciate that because it opens it up because then they think 'OK well, it's safe to talk about this'. Because I think a lot of young people struggle knowing who it is safe to talk to about things and who it's not safe to talk to about things and I think they've got a pretty good antennae about people who panic about it, people who won't and I think that they are constantly gauging that and I think it is difficult in secondary schools because they come into contact with so many people for a shorter length of time that it may be more difficult for them to establish 'well, this is a safe person to talk to'.

Here Sarah talks about communication not just in terms of helping pupils to find the right language, but also by defining the boundaries of that engagement in a very direct way. Recognising that this was an area that many adults struggled with, she saw it as an important part of her role to offer pupils an alternative source of support. By naming the issues and presenting them as 'normal' topics of conversation she saw herself as

providing a more honest form of communication to that offered by teachers. She describes this in terms of providing a context that is 'safe'. Sarah's upfront approach to the issues contrasts with the power struggles described by Kehily (2002) in which it was often pupils who set and controlled the agenda in the classroom in their attempts to challenge authority. By anticipating the agenda in the way she describes, Sarah felt that she was able to be 'in control' of that interaction while still adopting an informal approach.

This kind of openness and familiarity was a feature of all of the interviews with support staff. They identified their relationships with pupils as being qualitatively different to those of teachers. Many of the staff consciously distinguished themselves by their ability to access information and gain insight into pupils' lives in a way that teachers could not. As described by Bateman and Rhodes (2003), the nature of such roles means that relationships are often more 'democratic', with some pupils seeing their Learning Mentor as more like a 'buddy' than a figure of authority (p.122). In a similar way, many of the support staff talked about their relationships with pupils as something which they themselves valued and chose to invest in. Graham, a Lead Learning Mentor in a mixed school, saw his role very much in terms of offering pupils an alternative form of adult contact by establishing very different boundaries to those of teachers:

> **G:** It is because we have a completely different relationship with the kids and that we do build up that level of trust where they know that they can say certain things to us and .. and I say things back to them you know, I mean, I think if any of the teachers heard the way that I spoke to the kids then [laughs] they'd be really shocked you know.

Being able to engage with pupils in ways that could be interpreted as 'shocking' is understood to be part of the process of building relationships of trust. Graham presented this not as something he needed to excuse, but with a sense of pride at the level of familiarity it facilitated. By distancing himself from the more authoritarian position adopted by teachers, Graham saw himself as better able to support pupils and to talk about issues that were 'out of bounds' to teachers.

The kinds of conversations Graham hints at in this extract were expanded at great length during the interview where he talked about his daily experiences with pupils in

animated and often humorous ways. It was evident from the way Graham described these interactions that he enjoyed this more informal approach:

> G: I have had amazing conversations with Year-10 and Year-11 students, specifically around sex... about, to girls about becoming pregnant and things like chlamydia and the Boots free testing stuff, um... and of course it goes on to wider things like you know, even more serious STIs, you know talking about HIV and AIDS and the world's response to things like that and it's just, it kind of explodes. But even down to specifics you know, where, talking to boys who are going out with girls for the first time and then they start talking to you about it. So I think I am very forward with the kids, I ask them if they're thinking about having sex and what precautions they are going to take [laughs]. The boys are really funny you know, when I start talking about condoms and practicing putting condoms on and using condoms to masturbate they are so shocked [laughs], they hate it, they go 'Sir, Sir!' and I say - 'Well, you know, just don't let it be the first time you put a condom on being the first time you have sex because that's going to be terrible, it's a nightmare, why would you want to do that to yourself?' So it's quite funny.

The use of humour is frequently advocated in guidance and research as one of the most effective ways to engage young people – and young men in particular - around sex (Blake 2004; Buston and Wight 2006; Measor et al. 1996). Graham's use of humour and his sense of fun when instructing young men to experiment with condoms was one of the many examples he gave to illustrate the dynamics of this relationship. They were always presented with full details and often entailed a use of language that could be considered unorthodox in a school setting. This sort of banter was clearly very effective and his ability to see the funny side of sensitive situations had enabled him to access traditionally difficult topics. This was contrasted not only with pupils' relationships with teachers but also with the relationships they had with other adults. In a school where the majority of pupils were Muslim, from low-income Bangladeshi and Pakistani families, Graham attributed their shock and initial embarrassment to the fact that many of them were not used to adults in authority using that kind of language, or talking to them in that way. He described boys' relationships with the Imam and the expectations of their families as inadequately preparing them for the kinds of messages about sexuality that they confronted outside of the home. He saw his role not just in terms of opening up dialogue but in challenging many of the cultural attitudes and opinions expressed about gender and sexuality.

The intersection between sex/uality and culture arose frequently in Graham's narrative of his experience. An openly gay white man in his early fifties, Graham was acutely aware of his reputation amongst other staff and of the way in which issues of sexuality arose amongst his pupils. He had no doubt that the older students were aware of his sexuality and could name a number of occasions in which this had been made clear to him. He was intrigued, but also pleased by what seemed to be a mostly accepting response, particularly considering the religious discourses and social prejudices that many pupils had to contend with. He used a description of an incident in which he responded to a group of male students calling him 'Bilo' (Gujarati for gay) to illustrate how this intersection manifested in practice, but also to illustrate his ability to manage such situations and indeed, to turn them to his advantage. Being able to 'have a laugh and a joke' with pupils was identified as an important tool when dealing with sensitive topics, but it was also important when faced with situations where pupils' reactions were more challenging. The familiarity accorded to him in joking for example, was drawn on in more serious situations to encourage pupils to think about their behaviour and their use of language in more nuanced ways. In this sense, he capitalised on his more familiar and humorous approach to challenge some of the entrenched sexism and homophobia within the male peer group.

It was not just a confidence with the details of sex/uality that stood out amongst the support staff but also the different use of language and modes of communication. Pushing what some might consider to be controversial or sensitive subjects to the forefront of a conversation was not just a 'technique' for working with young people, it was part of the way in which many of the support staff communicated in their everyday lives. This was also identified by a number of support staff as one of the main reasons why so many teachers struggled to communicate when it came to SRE.

Anita, for example, a Lead Teaching Assistant (TA) who had been working in Charlesford School for four years, was a local woman with a strong working-class identity and a reputation amongst the pupils for being firm but fair. As someone who was not shy to confront pupils, she was often used by teaching staff to assist with discipline issues and to work with the most disaffected. As a TA, she had experience working with a number of different teachers in the classroom but also spent a considerable amount of time with smaller groups of pupils in less formal settings. Anita

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saw sex education in black-and-white terms. She felt that the approach to sex/uality taken by teachers was too middle class and was not delivered in a way that pupils could relate to. She found it continually frustrating that teachers did not use, or even *understand* the language used by pupils which she came into contact with on a daily basis. When it came to 'the nitty-gritty' she claimed, 'the kids are educating the teachers with regards to the slang words'. As a gay woman she was highly conscious of the way sexuality was talked about by teachers and of the treatment of gay pupils. She felt that sexuality was routinely shied away from, particularly on the grounds of religious and cultural sensitivity, and that this did not reflect the way in which the pupils talked about it amongst themselves. Spending more time than most around pupils, both in and outside of school, she felt that the classed and racialised dimensions of the debate amongst the young was not being addressed. She saw this as a direct consequence of middle-class teachers' political sensibilities.

The following extract comes from a discussion of pupils' attitudes to sexuality and the kinds of conversations that Anita had had with pupils. In the extract, Anita is responding to a question from me about whether she thought that pupils were aware of sexual diversity in their local area:

> A: Yeah I do, not so much the working class because they've got a very one-way of thinking, I think the more middle class are more accepting, 'oh ya ya my friend's gay' [affected posh accent] you know? Whereas when it's the working class it's 'ew no', or it's 'urgh'. You don't get black men that are gay, you don't get black women who are gay, or if they are gay 'ah they're coconuts', or 'the Oreos', you know, everything else they are only black on the skin but not black on the inside, you know? They [pupils] totally disbelieve about that ...
> PH: *But does that stop them seeing them? You know, I'm thinking about the kids out on [big main shopping street], you know, do you think the kids notice?*
> A: Yeah, because you hear them lot taking the micky out of them, like if you're on the bus and they see them walking down the road they'll be shouting out, 'urgh, he's so gay, he's so bent' things like that. The comments they come out with with each other and you can just hear it gets louder and louder on the bus and then they talk about it the next day at school like it was a big thing you know, like they saw a man walking down with three heads or something!

Anita's forward and, at times, brash approach contrasted strongly with the careful management of language evident in the approach taken by some of the teachers. Being

upfront about the classed and racialised dimensions of the sex/uality was not considered by Anita to be 'sensitive' but simply part of the way in which the issues arose. Anita could not understand why teachers found this so difficult and was very dismissive of the idea that cultural sensitivity was a legitimate excuse. It was not that she was not aware of the complex nature of the issues, but that she could not see how avoiding them was any kind of solution. While many teachers found her approach politically uncomfortable, it was also an important bridge between pupils and the institution. She was trusted and approached by pupils as someone who understood them and who could talk 'on their level'. At the same time, she articulated a very tolerant and open perspective towards sex/uality – something that they did not necessarily expect. As with Sarah and Karen, this approach was highly valued by many teaching staff who were not used to relating either to pupils, or to each other, in such an upfront way. When it came to talking about sex/uality, this provided a vital channel through which pupils could receive support that did not reflect the predominantly middle-class ethos of the school.

Support staff and identity construction

For all the support staff I spoke to, engaging pupils around issues of sex/uality was considered neither problematic, nor an area that required a specific level of expertise. From the way they responded to my questions and followed their own threads, it was clear that talking about sex and relationships was considered not as something uncomfortable or separate, but as an integral part of pupils' lives and of their interactions with them. This was reflected in the way in which many spoke about their experiences in terms of the everyday and sometimes the trivial, with adolescent concerns illustrated through casual comments and humorous anecdotes. It was not that they did not take pupils' concerns seriously, but that sex/uality was not considered to be a sensitive and controversial issue *per se*. The difficulties experienced by teachers and other adults were widely acknowledged and it was seen as part of their role to offer pupils an alternative, more accessible means of communicating. How this was done varied between individuals and was not so much the result of learnt techniques but of the use of personal resources and dispositions, as well as personal experience and training. This was shaped by the different social locations of many of the support staff and the proximity that many of them felt to the pupils they were working with. They were aware of their ability to interact with pupils in a way that was not accessible to

many teachers and this resulted in greater confidence in speaking about their experiences.

It would be easy to assume from these interviews that while teachers are constrained by the demands of their professional roles, the flexibility of supportive roles means that support staff are more able to 'be themselves'. The 'emotion management' evident in the interviews with teachers is much less apparent in the seemingly more relaxed narratives of support staff. But this would be to ignore the way in which supportive roles are also constructed around particular discourses and practices within schools. Following Zembylas, just as teacher identity is not fixed but is constituted through the daily interactions and negotiations within the school, so too must support staff 'become' their individual roles in the everyday performance of it.

As with teachers, support staff must also find a way to make those roles 'work'. In my own experience as a Learning Mentor, I was very aware of the expectation that I would be able to access different areas of pupils' lives and felt the pressure to prove my ability in my relationships with students. The position of Learning Mentor is also increasingly professionalised and is subject to monitoring and evaluation procedures that measure and record performance. While the role itself may be less prescribed than that of the teacher, there are still expectations and rules about what behaviour is 'appropriate' and what constitutes effective practice. This is very clearly illustrated by Karen who relates her experience of taking up the post and the kinds of adjustments she had to make. What she had assumed would be her 'just talking' turned out to require a very different kind of approach. By adopting a therapeutic discourse that privileges self-awareness and self-knowledge, she was constructing a particular kind of identity from the discursive resources she had available. As with all of the Learning Mentors, this was an identity that was consciously marked out from that of teachers by its capacity to engage pupils in ways that signalled their emotional closeness and understanding.

Teachers and support staff: *Habitus*, cultural capital and value

I have already suggested in this chapter that while professional and practical differences shape the experiences of teachers and support staff in significant ways, they are not the only factors that impact on the kinds of relationships they are able to build. The interviews with both teachers and support staff demonstrated that this more oppositional

identity is made to 'work' by drawing on resources, or forms of cultural capital, which are not conventionally valued as part of pedagogic practice. For teachers, there is a popular assumption that they are 'experts' in their chosen field and that their status is something they have achieved (Zembylas 2003). For support staff, however, status and authority were established in very different ways.

Relationships and interactions with pupils were often described in terms of their proximity; that is, through their tacit understandings of pupils' lives and behaviour acquired from living in the local area, having been a pupil at the school, or coming from similar class, ethnic or religious backgrounds. As highlighted at the start of this section, within the predominantly white middle-class environment of the school, support staff often constitute not just a professionally but also a socially distinct group. In Bourdieu's terms, this unspoken familiarity through which relationships are constituted, can be understood in terms of *habitus:* the dispositions and internalised and embodied practices shared by those who occupy a specific social field. Building relationships of trust was partly about the responses support staff had to pupils' experiences and behaviour because of their familiarity with the meanings attached to them. This was particularly pronounced when it came to sex/uality. The approach of support staff to pupils' language, comments and behaviour was very different to that of teachers.

It is important to point out however, that there is no simple relationship between social class and attitudes to sex/uality – or, more importantly, between familiarity in terms of *habitus* and the ability to build informal relationships with pupils. The stereotype of a direct and open working class and an uptight, sexually-repressed middle class fails to account for the complex and fluid ways in which class and sexual attitudes are cut across by factors such as 'race', ethnicity, religion, language, length of stay in the UK and consumption of popular culture.

When it came to talking about sex/uality, familiarity in terms of *habitus* was neither a guarantee nor a barrier to forming more informal relationships with pupils. What was also significant in these encounters, but perhaps much less tangible, was what was *valued.* According to Bourdieu, capital has no objective value; it is determined by the extent to which its value is recognised as such. In this sense, the ultimate source of value comes from the field or group in which individuals are placed (Grenfell and James

1998:23). The kinds of cultural capital that are valued by pupils when it comes to talking about sex/uality are not necessarily the kinds that reflect their own perceptions, attitudes and understandings. Graham, for example, used a bawdy humour and light touch to address very personal issues and to bridge some of the cultural boundaries of being a white gay man in a predominantly Asian, Muslim school. His approach was valued by pupils even where it was not recognised, because it provided them with an opportunity to explore other ways of being and talking about sex/uality.

In Aileen's case, it was not her 'expert' knowledge about sex or competence with the issues that was valued, but the supportive and enabling environment she was willing to provide for her pupils. According to Grenfell and James (1998), we do not know we have capital until we enter a field where it is valued, where it buys something (p.25). In taking a risk with her pedagogic practice, Aileen discovered that in the field of PSHE, she had a form of cultural capital that was of value. In this sense, teachers and adults from a variety of backgrounds manage to make this relationship 'work' by drawing on other resources and forms of cultural capital than those that are conventionally valued in teaching. These may be more or less accessible, and more or less threatening, depending on your professional role, the context of individual schools and the kinds of cultural capital you bring to them. It can be argued that in the context of support work in schools, other forms of cultural capital have symbolic value; they are recognised by pupils as being a legitimate source of authority. By having a greater diversity of professional roles, drawn from a range of social backgrounds, schools can provide pupils with multiple ways to engage with issues of sex/uality and to explore their sexual identities. What has not been discussed in this chapter are the potential political consequences of confining these forms of symbolic capital to the subfields of SRE and support work.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the experiences of teachers and support staff in relation to engaging young people around issues of sex/uality. I have used interview and observational material to illustrate the range of experiences and the diversity with which issues of sex/uality are now approached by different members of staff. While the experience of teachers was shown to be more negative than that of the support staff, both were seen to be involved in a form of 'identity work' in which their professional

identities were shaped by expectations and normalising discourses about what was 'appropriate'. I highlighted the practical obstacles facing teachers in the conduct of SRE and the fact that the marginal space occupied by SRE on the timetable meant that there were few opportunities for teachers to develop their skills or to risk alternative pedagogies. As such they were required to draw on personal resources in an effort to develop alternative identities which were recognised or *valued* by pupils. These were often forms of cultural capital that were different, and in some cases oppositional, to those conventionally drawn on in teaching. The experience of support staff showed that, unlike teachers, their professional identities were built on their capacity to develop more informal relationships with pupils. In this sense, they were required to draw on different forms of cultural capital in the performance of their professional 'self'. I showed through the interviews that, for many support staff, this meant drawing on areas of familiarity that existed between their lives and those of their pupils. This was understood in terms of *habitus* and the unspoken recognition of common dispositions and points of reference. I have suggested that while alternative forms of cultural capital may constitute symbolic capital in supportive roles, the continued marginalisation of issues of sex/uality from the field of education more generally means that these are not considered to be valuable in other areas of schooling.

Chapter 4

'Do they *really* need to know?' A teacher–sex educator encounter

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I considered teachers' experiences alongside, and in relation to, those of support staff. I examined how teachers and support staff spoke about their experiences of engaging pupils with issues of sex/uality and how they understood them in relation to their professional roles. In this chapter I look at the experience of one teacher in relation to another less conventional presence in SRE education – that of the specialist sex educator. I focus on the dynamics of this relationship as it unfolded over a three-week period. During this time, the teacher, Helen, and her Year-9 tutor group, hosted me as part of an SRE teacher-training programme. Using my position as participant and observer, this chapter explores some of the complexities involved in delivering SRE by looking at the development of the relationship between myself, a visiting sex educator, and Helen, a senior and experienced teacher. To put this relationship in context, the background to this project and my role within the encounter are mapped out at the start of the chapter. The remainder of the chapter uses descriptive passages to try to capture the details and atmosphere of this encounter, and to explore the complex dynamics that exist not just between teacher and pupil but also between teacher and 'expert' visitor. Drawing on Goffman's theory (1959) of social theatre, I examine teaching as a managed performance which the discussion of sex/uality has the capacity to interrupt. This interruption is considered as a potentially productive moment in which competing discourses and perspectives on sexuality must be negotiated. It is suggested that this is a difficult and often emotionally challenging experience for some teachers and that this needs to be taken account of when thinking about how to interpret and improve practice in this field.

As highlighted in the introduction, schools are increasingly under pressure to meet government targets in relation to pupils' sexual health and emotional development. In the absence of a statutory framework for SRE, many schools make use of additional support or buy-in training from external agencies in order to meet these objectives. There has been a significant growth in the number and variety of resources and training packages now available to schools, as well as an increased interest from academic

circles in assessing their effectiveness. Prior to and during my fieldwork, I worked for a number of organisations that developed resources and training packages specifically aimed at improving the quality of teaching in SRE. The material in this chapter is drawn from my experience as a trainer in a teacher-training programme run by a charity which will be called 'SRE Relate'. The programme aimed to improve teacher confidence and skills in SRE by modelling different approaches and resources. SRE Relate had recently received local government funding to extend their programme throughout the borough where I was working. Schools were invited to take part and those teachers that volunteered were paired up with individual trainers over a three-week period. Using lesson plans and materials from the resource pack, trainers would model and team-teach lessons based on teachers' individual strengths and weaknesses. Each lesson was to be planned, discussed and reviewed with individual teachers. The aim was to leave teachers with the confidence to explore alternative ways of delivering SRE. The programme was specifically designed to meet the skills and training gap identified by schools by providing teachers not just with new resources but with practical guidance on how to use them. As with many external agencies of this kind, the ethos of the project was based on the assumption that young people have a right to a positive and legitimate sexuality and emphasised a more participatory, child-centred approach to teaching and learning.

As I illustrate in this chapter, the programme, though it had a prescribed format, needed to be responsive to the constraints and demands of individual schools. Accordingly, the way in which it unfolded in practice was often very different to the way it appeared on paper. The format and success of the project varied enormously between schools and individuals, depending on the planning and support that had gone in prior to our arrival and the dynamic between individual teachers and trainers. The example drawn on in this chapter is neither representative nor exceptional in these terms, but has been selected as an illustration of some of the inherent difficulties and conflicts of conducting this kind of work. Various research projects have drawn attention to SRE as a 'difficult' practice but there is less attention given to what this actually means for individual teachers and pupils in the classroom. This chapter examines in detail one example of what can happen when teachers are faced with exploring alternative ways of working in the classroom and in particular, when they are forced to confront their own attitudes towards pupils' needs. In that sense it is an exploration of the different moral

perspectives that exist around sex education and of how they are embodied in classroom practice. This is done by drawing on my own experiences as a practitioner in this field as well as my capacity as an observer of school interactions as part of my research. This chapter is based around four episodes or vignettes drawn from one particular placement at Bard School. The first episode describes the introductory meeting between the Relate SRE trainers and the teachers who had volunteered to take part, while the other three episodes explore different aspects of the interaction in the classroom.

Meeting early resistance

I arrived at the first meeting at Bard School knowing very little about the teachers other than that they were all Year-9 tutors and all fairly experienced. The names and numbers of those who had volunteered had only recently been finalised and it had proved difficult to coordinate a date when we were all able to attend. I arrived slightly late to the meeting, which was unusual, and the small room was already full. I recognised two of my colleagues and after a brief apology I smiled and nodded a professional hello to the other four strangers in the room. The standard-issue school tables were laid out in a sort-of square, taking up most of what was otherwise an entirely empty room. There was a whiteboard on the wall at one end but the room seemed far too small and cramped to ever be used as a classroom. We were all introduced by Simon, the programme lead; the three trainers (one couldn't make it) and the four teachers who had signed up. It was the end of the school day and little effort was made by some of the teachers to conceal the fact that we were being fitted in. Simon began by outlining the idea behind the programme and how the meeting would proceed. As if on cue, one of the female teachers interrupted to say that she was unable to stay later than 4.30 as she had to collect her daughter from school. Aware that this was a statement rather than an apology, Simon emphasised again that it was merely a preliminary meeting and that, yes, we would definitely be done by 4.30.

I had little to say during the early part of the meeting as Simon ran through the programme and who would be working with whom. Glances were cast across the room as the pairings were read out and you could see each person, acknowledging their other, make their hidden assessment of how they thought it would work. My partner, whom I knew only as 'Helen', was a woman a few years my senior, but – as I was to understand from the glance I received – in many ways my superior. I smiled confidently and hoped

that this was not a sign of things to come. Simon explained the purpose of the training –
to model different resources and approaches to SRE –and a folder containing the
resources and lesson plans was circulated around the table. While Simon described the
importance of the programme, each teacher skimmed through the material before
politely passing it on. One of the teachers asked, rather dismissively, what the
relevance of the programme was for those who were 'already experienced', to which
Simon responded with his usual etiquette, that the programme was designed to work to
individual's strengths and that he was sure there would something in there for everyone.

After fifteen minutes, the general introduction was over and the discussion had moved
on to the practical implementation of the sessions. Helen, had been flicking through the
resource pack for some time, looking decidedly unimpressed. Just as Simon began
describing the shape of the lesson she interrupted him, shaking her head pointedly as if
we had all missed something, to ask, 'Do they really need to know all this?' Taken
aback by the abruptness of her question, no one responded immediately and, as if to
qualify her question, Helen went on to relay a recent experience she had had with her
tutor group. She described having been given a leaflet to read with her class which had
included a long list of words describing all of the different things you could do as part
of 'Safe Sex'. Having started to read this list out to her class, she explained, she had
been too disgusted to continue. Relaying the list again for our benefit, she asked how
words such as 'licking, stroking and rimming' could *possibly* be considered appropriate
for her Year-9 class. Repeating her first question (only this time rhetorically), she asked
again - did they *really* need to know all that?

Acknowledging her position, Simon agreed that it was a difficult area, but he hoped she
would see that the programme was about providing pupils with accurate and relevant
information wherever possible. It wasn't clear whether Helen found this response
appeasing or patronising but looking across at her I could see that she was far from
convinced. Simon stressed again that it was an important issue she had raised and one
that the programme was designed to address. It was clear from his tone that he was
trying to move on without being too dismissive and having been the person to request a
prompt finish, Helen was not in a position to object. In an attempt to redirect the
meeting Simon returned to his description of the lesson plan, making reference to
Helen's concerns wherever he could. She did not respond to any of his efforts,

remaining in stony silence for the remainder of the session. From her prompt exit at 4.30, we were to be in no doubt of her reservations about the programme.

The frosty reception we received at Bard School was not uncommon for the initial stages of the programme. As with other forms of training, but perhaps more so because of its content, teachers were often sceptical of the capacity of 'outsiders', and – worst of all – non-teaching staff, to offer anything of practical value. The meeting was not just eating in to their personal time, but as with all training attached to a new strategy or programme, would ultimately mean more work to integrate it into an already crowded curriculum. While there is no doubt that many teachers are very receptive to new initiatives and welcome the opportunity to develop their skills, the evidence from my own experience as a sex education trainer was that introducing these opportunities was like walking on eggshells. Not necessarily because teachers were always hostile, but because you could never be sure exactly which reaction would confront you. Helen had from the very outset been sceptical – almost aggressively so – but it was equally common to be met with attempts at a light-hearted over-familiarity as teachers tried to manoeuvre themselves out of uncomfortable positions. Meeting with such reactions had become an expected part of the programme and while it had not been the most ideal start, it had certainly not come as a surprise.

Helen's very vocal concern about the appropriateness of the material in the resource folder was also a familiar one. Many authors have drawn attention to the conflict in sex education between health pragmatism and moral traditionalism (Epstein and Johnson 1998; Jackson 1982; Pilcher 2005). This can be described as a conflict between the right of children and young people *to* accurate and relevant information about sex, and their right to be free *from* such information. In suggesting that young people did not 'need' to know some of the information in the resource pack, Helen was drawing on a more traditional discourse in which talking to children and young people about sexuality is seen to be potentially corrupting. In her reference to the leaflet, Helen illustrates this point by listing the kinds of references she was objecting to. The leaflet in question was one which had specifically been designed to introduce pupils to some of the alternatives to penetrative sex in an honest and upfront way. Deemed by the local health authority to be age-appropriate for that group, the leaflet can be seen as an example of the recent efforts of some health promotion bodies to respond to the

demands of young people for more explicit information. As such, they are freely available to schools and are often displayed or distributed in communal areas. As illustrated by Epstein and Johnson (1998), resources and activities designed to educate children and young people about sex have often been the focus of media and political scandal, with individuals and organisations being accused of corrupting their innocence. Given this history, Helen's objection was well-versed and, as pointed out by Simon, was one of the issues the programme was designed to address.

Less explicit, but no less apparent was Helen's objection to the message of the leaflet and being put in the position of actually having to read it out loud. The purpose of the leaflet was to encourage young people to explore the positive and pleasurable aspects of their sexuality in ways that carried less risk of pregnancy and the transmission of STIs. In that sense, it was not just upfront, but also carried a particular message whereby certain kinds of sexual exploration were seen as positive and to be encouraged. In relaying the list during the meeting, there was an implicit assumption that we would share her sense of 'disgust' at the explicit nature of this message. As described by Buston et al. (2001), many adults find talking about any aspect of sex not only difficult but also unnecessary. Put in the position of having to physically say the words in front of her class, Helen found herself not only morally compromised but also personally embarrassed. The need for educational resources and approaches that acknowledge young people as desirous and legitimate sexual subjects is something that is continually emphasised in research (Allen 2005b; Allen 2005c; Epstein and Johnson 1998; Hirst 2004; Ingham 2005; Kehily 2002). But while the leaflet itself can be seen as a positive step in educational terms, this exchange illustrates how progressive messages are not always favourably received by those whose responsibility it is to deliver them.

Classroom performance and the 'special visitor'
Two weeks later, at around 1.30pm, I met Helen in her faculty office for a quick discussion before the first lesson. I was laden with folders, DVDs and containers of plastic cards and was not exactly sure from her reception whether she had remembered our meeting. She appeared cool, but by no means unfriendly and I felt a sense of relief that perhaps she was not going to be as obstructive as she had been previously. There seemed to be a number of important tasks that had yet to be completed during those last fifteen minutes of lunch-break and Helen continued to busy herself around me while I

laid out the resources. The room was full of activity as other members of staff came in and out, exchanging pleasantries and information with each other as they passed. Sensing that this was not going to be the focused meeting I had anticipated, I kept the introduction as brief as possible. The plan was that I would model a number of different resources around the key themes in the lesson plan and we would then meet for a debrief after the session to go through them and see what she thought. This was OK she said, but it would have to be a quick chat as she was due over in the RE department for the last period. Having failed to secure a single debriefing session in the previous school, I nodded gratefully and said that would be fine. A rush of teachers entering and leaving the office signalled that the bell was about to go and, gathering up the resources, I moved towards the door to get out of their way.

From the minute we left the faculty office Helen was the embodiment of a school teacher. As if pulled taut by a string, she adjusted her poise as we entered the corridor and immediately began to scan the horizon for any sign of misbehaviour. Walking into the crowd I was aware of the glances she received from pupils and the uncomplicated way in which they responded to her orders to tuck in shirts and remove jewellery. At the end of the corridor she held the door open for me. A young man, ready to push straight past me, hesitated and pulled back. Nodding in thanks as I walked passed him, I noted how graciously he took this little moment of enforced chivalry. Out in the playground I could see Helen's tutor group. Gathered loosely around a prefab building, they made the usual adjustments as they saw her approach. Bags were picked up and slung over shoulders, phones stashed, and names shouted out across the playground as they moved to gather around the door. I was eyed with some interest by a few of the pupils but mostly ignored as they settled themselves in line. Having unlocked the door, they filed in past us and their playground manner dissolved quickly. By the time Helen had made it to her desk, they were almost all in place. There were about 30 pupils, equally divided between boys and girls all stood behind their chairs in detached pairs facing the front. The group was mixed, made up predominantly of Black and Asian pupils and there were five deaf students clustered together on the far left. They were accompanied by two women I assumed were their support assistants, who put down their handbags and took up their positions at the front. Standing to the side and gently resting on a desk I was introduced as a 'special visitor' who had come to take their sex education lessons for the next three weeks. This was accompanied by a stern reminder

about behaviour (with the threat of removal for those who found this difficult) before they were told to sit. As the noise of moving chairs settled, a quick and efficient register was taken and Helen, taking up a seat on an empty desk to my right, indicated that it was my turn to take over.

Stepping up to the front of the class, I had to resist a childish urge to over-compensate for this austere introduction. There was no doubt that Helen was in charge and I found her command of the group both impressive and daunting. It reminded me of just how different our styles were and, in my desire suddenly to shift gear or to turn around the mood of the room, I had wanted to show that this was not the only way to do things. This was of course, not only childish but also impossible. No matter how we actually felt about each other or the situation, we were there as part of the same team. In the same way that Helen's doubts about me and the programme were concealed in her introduction to me as the 'special visitor', I too was to maintain any reservations I had by supporting her approach. Trying to maintain some level of continuity, I thanked the pupils for their attention and began my introductions to the session.

The Helen I encountered in the faculty office before the first lesson was markedly different from the Helen I had encountered in the preliminary meeting. She was not necessarily any more convinced about the programme, but surrounded by the daily minutiae of teaching there was neither the time nor the will to become engaged in any kind of protest. Helen was tied up with the usual tasks to be completed in a busy teaching schedule and, though distracted, she was also more relaxed and friendly. As described above, this changed instantly when the bell went for the end of lunch and the familiarity of the staff room was replaced by the teacherly austerity of the corridor. Like Goffman's subjects, this was a 'coherent, embellished and well-articulated' performance in which the shifts and changes in Helen's demeanour signalled unmistakably to her audience that she was 'in role'. Goffman describes the expression and movement used to identify a particular role not in terms of a pre-rehearsed script, but as the 'command of an idiom, a command that is exercised from moment to moment with little calculation or forethought' (Goffman 1959:81). From this short exchange, I could see that Helen's command was effortless, there were no slips or faults, no room for manoeuvre or error; it had an 'unthinking ease' that pupils instantly recognised (p.81).

Perhaps more so than many of Goffman's other examples, the role of teacher has more obvious parallels with a theatrical performance. Whilst all the world is not a stage – as Goffman's many critics have pointed out (see Denzin 2003), the layout of classrooms and the physical space occupied by pupils and teachers are easily analogous to a conventional theatre. The classroom is the 'front stage' where the teacher performs directly to pupils (the audience), and the staffroom, or faculty office, the 'back stage' – the 'hidden or private place' where pupils cannot go (Goffman 1959)). In her switch from staff room to corridor, Helen was careful not to betray any aspect of herself in other roles in front of pupils, concealing any discrepancies behind a façade of composure and authority. It was the strict separation of these roles, both physically and expressively, that gave it the appearance of a theatrical performance.

There are various reasons why it is useful to think about Helen's performance in terms of social theatre. Distinct from Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor, teaching is often described in terms of a performance where standing up in front of a large group of students is understood as a form of dramatic display (Armstrong 2003; Britzman 1986). Like the stage, pupils collude in the performance, aware that they are witnessing the enactment of a particular role that is distinct from those they may have glimpsed in the staffroom or outside school. Thinking about it in terms of staging and theatre captures the public nature of teaching and the fact that the coherence of the performance is something upon which they are judged. As Britzman (1986) describes, pupils have specific ideas about how teachers should act in the classroom and will let them know when these expectations are not being met. In that sense, while Helen's performance was accepted and believed by pupils, this is not the same as saying that they did not know that it was also managed. Practicing a very 'traditional' pedagogy (ibid.), the social distance between Helen and her pupils was heavily policed and there was no doubt that they were aware that this was Mrs Fern their teacher, not Mrs Fern the employee/wife/mother or friend. In Henry (1999), a classroom encounter is described in which a teacher, goaded by a single pupil, finally snaps and shouts at the pupil, unable to contain her rage and frustration. The pupil appears quietly satisfied at finally exposing such raw, uncharacteristic emotions while other pupils are shocked and uncertain how to react. This interaction partly illustrates that pupils are aware of the performative aspects of their teachers' behaviour and the fact that it conceals some

other, perhaps more 'real' self. It also highlights that exposing that other, less managed performance can be both a source of excitement and satisfaction for pupils, as well as of uncertainty and even fear. When thinking about what is 'difficult' about teaching SRE it is useful to think about the ways in which talking about a subject like sex impacts on the performative aspects of teaching, the kinds of challenges it presents to the performer and how it enhances or detracts from the definition of the situation which has been carefully crafted.

A momentary lapse

The first part of the lesson passed without incident as pupils responded politely to my questions, avoiding my cues to take a more active role or to test my lenience. Helen did not contribute to the lesson but her presence was apparent in their cautious responses, as well as in their good manners and behaviour. Mid-way through the session, I introduced a group activity that was designed specifically to provoke discussion and debate. The class were divided into groups of three or four and each group was given a set of cards with statements on them. After reading each card, I explained, they had to decide in their groups whether they thought the statements were 'true' or 'false' or whether they were 'not sure'. Each card was then placed into the corresponding pile. This was a good way to ascertain pupils' level of knowledge and the different opinions that were present within the group. They focused on the task straight away and it was a good few minutes before someone put their hand up to ask a question. Making my way across the room I crouched at the side of the table where a young man, pointing towards one of the slips, asked me what it meant. Squinting as it wobbled in his hand, the word above his finger read 'masturbate' as part of the phrase 'it's wrong to masturbate'. Looking up at the faces of the others in the group I could see that he was not the only one who was unsure. Looking straight at the young man who had asked the question, I said, 'it's touching yourself, you know, having a wank. Or for girls ...' 'Yeah yeah' he interrupted, quickly withdrawing the slip, 'I get it'. He looked away embarrassed and another member of the group giggled and looked down at the table. Glancing around to check they had all understood, I smiled warmly and stood up to move on. In that time, several other pupils had put up their hands and, indicating to Helen to do the same, I began to move around the room.

Already constructing the feedback in my head and making a mental note to put together a preliminary activity about language, I was suddenly cornered by Helen in the middle of the room. She stopped me very abruptly. Indicating towards a table over the far side, she whispered intently that they had just asked her what 'oral sex' meant. This was the first time she had approached me during the session and, hushed tones notwithstanding, I could tell she was wound up. 'You see', she hissed accusingly, bending in closer, 'this is what I'm saying. Do they really need to know that?' Looking away to avoid being drawn in by the mixture of triumph and panic in her face, I glanced over at the group for any clues as to how to proceed. They were chatting inaudibly and did not seem to be waiting for her response. I could see nothing that suggested anything out of the ordinary. Desperately wanting to avoid being caught out, I said quickly, 'say blow job'. Helen looked at me in horror, so I ventured again, more gently, 'just try blow job, and see what they say'. Just as abruptly Helen turned and began to walk back over to the group. Half way between me and the table, a sensible-looking girl looked up and shouted across the room, 'It's OK Miss, don't worry, we've got it. It's giving head'. From the way the other members of the group were reaching across the table it was clear that they had already moved on. At this loud emission Helen stopped, and looking back towards me for just a brief uncomfortable second, she held my gaze. I saw an indecipherable mix of emotions pass uncomfortably across her face and I smiled only briefly in acknowledgement, before turning away. Focusing my body and my attention towards the other side of the room, I made sure that my face was concealed from view. Suppressing anything that could be construed as smug or self-congratulatory, I busied myself attending to the remaining groups.

The sense of satisfaction that I felt in that moment was not so much at having got my point across, as having had the good fortune not to have had to make it myself. The forthright and unabashed way in which the girl had called across to Helen had not only indicated that she was already familiar with at least the concept of 'oral sex', but that she considered it to be a perfectly legitimate piece of information to shout across the room. There was, quite simply, nothing to be said in that moment where, caught between an untenable moral high ground and the enormity of admitting defeat, Helen had turned back to face me. The creeping acknowledgement that not only did they already 'know' but that this was something she should have been aware of, was uncomfortable even to behold.

According to Goffman, one of the main problems for performers is that of 'information control' where 'the audience must not acquire destructive information about the situation that is being defined for them' (1959:53). As with having to read out a list of sexual techniques, being asked to explain the meaning of oral sex to her pupils placed Helen in a difficult position. It required that she speak with authority about something that made her feel incredibly uncomfortable. To attempt to do so was to risk giving away information to her audience that might damage her performance as someone who was knowledgeable and in control. Moving away from her sphere of 'expert' knowledge as a teacher of Religious Education, she found herself in a situation where there were no models, no 'repertoire' upon which she could draw. She was left, quite literally, without a script. According to Goffman, 'minor mishaps' such as hesitation and embarrassment, can introduce 'a definition of the situation which is incompatible with the projected claims of the performer' (p.144). In doing so, they run the risk of exposing what 'a delicate, fragile thing' the impression fostered actually is (p.61). In allowing her pupils to see her discomfort or to register her embarrassment, Helen would also be exposing the limits and the fallibility of her otherwise faultless performance. Quite understandably, she wished to avoid being exposed in that way and directed her body as well as her response to their question, towards me. In the same way that she felt too embarrassed to read the list in the leaflet, she turned away from the group in order to preserve control and maintain her role.

According to Denzin (2003), it is not just the physical enactment and the verbal and visual signs that do the work of performance, but also what is said, and what is implicated in the saying. 'Performances', he argues, 'are imbedded in language' where 'certain words do or perform things and what they do performatively refers back to meanings imbedded in language and culture' (p.135). While Helen's performance was theatrical and alerts us to the dramatic aspects of everyday interactions, its function was not only one of maintaining 'the show'. According to Denzin, Goffman's theory can be considered only superficially performative in that it seeks to describe social interaction but fails to fully interrogate it. His performers do not resist, but keep largely to their roles and adhere to their scripts. In that sense, Denzin argues, it is apolitical. From the perspective of dramaturgy, the interruptions described in this chapter refer to brief moments in which Helen 'slipped and stumbled', but then regained her poise (Denzin

2003:130). Failing to answer a question about oral sex is no more than a momentary break in a performance, which, as I have already pointed out, was otherwise faultless.

But if Helen's performance in the classroom is considered in terms of performativity, then neither the performance, nor the interruption of it, are neutral acts. According to Butler (1993), performativity refers to 'the power of discourse to reproduce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains' (p.2). Performativity refers not to the 'bounded' act of performance but to the capacity of that act to reproduce norms that 'precede, constrain, and exceed the performer' (p.24). Performativity implies agency – it is what the performance does (Pollock, cited in Denzin 2003). From this perspective performativity is 'doing what is done' (ibid.; emphasis in the original), but it also provides the resources from which resistance and subversion become possible (Butler 1993:22). Helen's performance as a teacher reproduces a particular kind of teacher – the distant disciplinarian, who, upholding a strict code of moral values, banishes sexuality not just from the classroom but from pupils' lives. The repetition of this performance and its recognition and acceptance by pupils, perpetuates the myth that sex/uality is absent in that relationship and has no place in the classroom.

In the terms used by Paechter (2004), Helen's rigid command of the classroom can be seen as a 'disciplining technique' in which pupils' bodies are regulated and controlled so as to appear as if they have 'disappeared completely' (p.314). One of the effects of such techniques is to sustain the illusion of distance between adults and young people in which sexuality is constructed not only as separate from the intellectual tasks of schooling (ibid.), but also as something adult, private and shameful. In walking away from the question or cutting short her reading of sexual terms Helen may have avoided a more significant exposure in terms of her performance, but in doing so she also reaffirmed which kinds of sexual language and knowledge are 'appropriate' in the classroom and which are not. When the sensible-looking girl confirmed her very everyday knowledge of oral sex by shouting the vernacular term 'giving head' across the classroom, it was not just Helen who was exposed but also the fragility of a discourse that attempts to conceal and deny the sexual in the lives of pupils. In that moment this utterance unwittingly exposed quite how wide the divide was between the kind of discourse that was embodied in Helen's performance and the discourses of sex/uality which shaped the everyday lives of pupils.

Courgettes and chaos

After turning away from Helen, the incident was not mentioned again. She remained cool and distant after the session, reporting in frank terms how she felt about particular activities and, as warned, excused herself abruptly to attend another meeting. I left the first session at the school feeling awkward about our exchange and with a strong sense of having been brushed aside. By the end of the second session however, the mood had begun to shift. Helen stayed longer after the lesson and did not express quite the same sense of urgency about needing to be somewhere else. When asked about the session, she again went straight for the activities she was not happy with and indicated quite plainly that she would not be using them again. But having made this point, she was then willing to share her thoughts about some of the follow-up activities I had asked her to think about. She mentioned that she had been considering an activity around language, where they could make language boards with all the different sexual terms on them and put them up on the wall. That way they could decide what kind of language they would use in class and what should be kept to the playground. Raising her eyes in mock horror she said that she did not know *what* she would do if someone came in the room and saw them up there, but obviously that was something she would 'need to think about'. I could see that she was hesitantly waiting for my response but not about to say so, so I volunteered that I thought it was a really great idea and perhaps they could even extend it to other languages, including sign language. There was a brief smile as she nodded at this and the expression on her face indicated some interest in this suggestion.

The last session of the programme was often the easiest. The focus was on contraception and came accompanied by the popular contraception 'tool-kit' including a box full of condoms and my special-issue blue demonstrator (which on this occasion was also being supplemented by some well-chosen courgettes). The pupils were by now familiar with my presence and it was easier to get them engaged when the activities were participatory. One of the activities involved looking at different kinds of contraceptive devices and trying to work out where they went and how they worked. Helen had again declined to team-teach the session and took up her usual position towards the front of the class. She seemed more relaxed and the atmosphere in the classroom was lively as pupils handed round various devices and tried to determine

their function. During the feedback session Helen had quite unexpectedly volunteered an answer to one of my questions about the IUD. While her answer was incorrect, she had laughed when I told her that it was still 'a very good guess'. Looking bashful but not uncomfortable, she said that it was probably better if she just kept quiet.

The final activity was the infamous condom demonstration. Infamous because there was always some element of comedy, or more often chaos, that accompanied it. The class had all been crowded round my table to watch my annotated version when Helen approached me to say that she had been called out of the class and would be back as soon as she could. I nodded in understanding and asked everyone to return to their seats. In the last activity (which always had to be last), each group was given a pile of condoms and each person had to try and follow the instructions and fit it correctly on the courgette. The role of the other members was to give constructive feedback to each person about how well they did. I watched a few demonstrations and could see that courgettes were considerably more difficult than the more stable rubber demonstrator I had used. This was in itself causing great hilarity amongst the groups as the courgettes slid off the table or wouldn't stay up straight. By the first time a loud burst of laughter came from a group at the back, one of whom was rocking dangerously back on his chair and pointing at a red-faced pupil across the table, I had already noticed a number of condoms being slipped unopened into pockets. The noise level rapidly rising, one group began to blow up their used condom which was quickly followed by another being inflated at twice the speed and projected across the room. Shouting across the noise that if everyone was finished with the activity then it was time to pack up, I had the sense that that familiar chaos was about to ensue. Opting for damage limitation, I grabbed the bin and began to walk quickly in between the tables asking each group to put the condoms, wrappers and courgettes in the bin. I was barely audible above the noise at some tables and had to repeat myself several times for those pupils oblivious to my concern.

It was just as some were beginning to leave their seats that the bell went and the sudden jolt of recognition across the room broke the chaos but not the noise level. In my best Helen voice, I said sternly that no one was leaving until they were all stood in silence behind their chairs. Still buzzing from the excitement and now itching to go out to lunch the response was very far from the kind of decorum Helen's presence would no

doubt have commanded. Some were still laughing and not making much effort to lower their voices while others were making just as much noise trying to get them to be quiet. Raising my own more than I would have liked, I half shouted that it had been a pleasure working with them and thanked them for their time and their thoughtful responses. The fact that I hoped they would keep up the good work with Mrs Fern was barely audible. Admitting defeat, I dismissed the class with a nod. When Helen wandered in moments later she smiled knowingly at the weary look on my face and asked how they had been. I described the situation that had just ensued in all its chaotic detail and with a look of almost-sympathy, Helen conceded that they could be lively at times. She apologised for having to leave me in that moment and taking the olive branch, I insisted that it was fine and I had no doubt that she would not encounter such difficulties when it was her turn.

SRE as a site of struggle

The shift in the dynamics of this relationship can only be described as a huge relief. It would be overstating the case to say that I felt the placement had been a success, but neither did I leave feeling like it had been a complete failure. Helen's confidence and openness as a sex educator remained limited. While she was willing to entertain some of the ideas I had put forward as part of the programme, there was still very much a sense that I had my way of doing things and she had hers. As illustrated above, while I was competent to administer activities such as the condom demonstration, I was very far from remaining 'in control' of its consequences. By acknowledging my failure to control the class, I was conceding both to Helen and myself the value of her approach. I may have offered something new and different, but Helen's performance provided students with recognised boundaries and consistency. Such structured perimeters have also been seen to play an important role in containing some of the emotional turbulence that accompanies adolescence (Briggs 2002; Waddell 2005; Youell 2006). Helen's solidity and the respect it commanded, evoked my own insecurities about my slightly more haphazard and considerably less disciplined approach. In my desire to rebel against her austere introduction, I was also trying to escape my own anxiety that I would not be up to the task.

According to Walkerdine et al. (2001), the feelings of the researcher after a research encounter hold important information about the encounter itself. Transference, identification and fantasies, they argue, are still present when you are engaged in

'rational' research, and greater attention to thoughts and feelings during the research process can achieve a greater level of understanding (p.88-9). My positioning within these encounters meant that I could not take up the role of detached, 'rational' observer as I was both physically and emotionally involved in the drama that unfolded. It could be argued that I was 'too involved' to be receptive to some of the subtleties and nuances of this exchange but it was because of my involvement that I was able to think through some of the emotional challenges that accompanied this kind of work. I can only guess at how Helen would describe the situations outlined in this chapter and I have no way of knowing how Helen's past experiences were implicated in them. However, her reactions to the situations described, and the ways in which they were communicated to me, had a powerful effect on my own experience.

When Helen approached me in the classroom to ask about handling the question of oral sex, I was unable to detach myself from the effect of her emotions. I felt very acutely in that moment that it was indeed my fault; that I had unnecessarily and immorally exposed her pupils, and, by implication, her, to 'inappropriate' material. I felt again like one of her pupils, less the rebellious one this time than the one being told off for having got it wrong and my desire to be seen as the liberal, confident sex educator who could win over pupils, exposed as a fraud. Instead of wanting to rebel against her authority, I felt admonished by it. To have observed this exchange it may have appeared as a brief aside between a teacher and a visitor during the lesson. Being part of that exchange allowed me to see and feel how intense the emotions and anxieties tied up within that situation actually were.

What is perhaps more accurate is that the exchanges described in this chapter are an illustration of the kinds of struggles that are fought over at the level of the classroom. These are the struggles between conflicting anxieties and desires, between the role of the teacher and the 'expert' visitor, between traditional and more child-centred pedagogies, between health pragmatism and moral conservatism, between what adults think pupils know and what they are actually aware of. In this sense, it is not just about drama, it is also about power, about what it was that was being defended in Helen's performance as a teacher (and mine as a teacher-trainer), and what it was that was being defended against. Where performativity is the everyday practice of 'doing what is done', particular practices can reaffirm repressive understandings that circulate in

everyday life (Pollock, cited in Denzin 2003:136). Helen's very effective performance as an authoritative and disciplined teacher also had the effect of denying pupils the opportunities to explore other ways of communicating about sex/uality. Although Helen and I were involved in a kind of powerplay over the status of our competing discourses, and Helen had to distance herself from me in the classroom, the opportunity opened by her pupils for exploring other aspects of the pupils' knowledge did provide Helen with an opportunity to rethink her position.

The personal challenge of SRE

The three sessions I spent with Helen and her year 9 class were, in many ways, unexceptional. While I found them personally satisfying in relation to a number of the other placements, they also replicated many of the difficulties and pleasures of doing that kind of work and reconfirmed what a complicated and messy task it was. There has been a lot written about what teachers do wrong in relation to SRE; the mistakes and errors of judgment they make in the classroom, the closing off of avenues for discussion, the recourse to 'defensive teaching', the reinforcing of gendered and sexual stereotypes and the resistance to addressing issues of pleasure (Allen 2005a; Hilton 2001; Hirst 2004; Holland et al. 1998; Ingham 2005; Kehily 2002; Skelton 2001). This is accompanied by theories about what teachers should be doing, how they should behave, what the ideal practice should look like and what it would enable (Allen 2006; Forrest 2002; Gilber 2007; Sharpe 2002). For Gilber (2007), it is the responsibility of adults to manage the teacher–pupil relationship and not only endure the routine tests of adolescents but be able to interpret and navigate those responses, as important markers of their emotional development. Gilber draws on Winnicott to describe this as a need for teachers to allow adolescents their 'immaturity' – that is, to see the testing of adult authority as an essential element of 'health' (Winnicott 1979:197). But as Gilber also concedes, paying attention to this kind of developmental work requires a great deal from sex educators; it requires not only specialist training but the will and ability to be reflective about their own experience of adolescence and how it is manifested in their teaching. As Helen's case and the previous chapter highlight, there is a great deal of emotional work that goes along with addressing the issues pertinent to sex education which can be challenging in a number of often highly personal ways. As described by Atkinson (2002), the current contradictory pressures around sex, on both young people and teachers, means that it takes a 'brave' person to create – rather than wait for –

opportunities to address difficult subjects. When confronted with the challenge of facing the controversy and complexity inherent in many of the issues, it is easy to see why teachers chose to stick with the subjects they feel 'safe' with.

Helen was a well-respected teacher and an archetypal disciplinarian – a quality that is widely valued. The SRE teacher-training programme forced her to discuss issues that made her feel uncomfortable and to do so in the very public arena of the classroom. This included having to talk about the details of specific sexual acts as well as answering questions about exactly what they involved. While it would be easy to dismiss Helen's attitude as old fashioned or out of touch with her pupils, it is important also to consider what it actually was that was being asked of her in those moments. As described by Buston et al., many teachers simply do not have access to a language that enables them to talk about sex/uality with pupils in this way. Perhaps the 'success' of programmes such as the one outlined in this chapter is that they open up opportunities for teachers and pupils to explore other ways of communicating about sex/uality in a classroom context. This does not necessarily mean adapting to some of the insights offered by psychoanalysis, but it may mean providing teachers who play significant roles in young peoples' lives opportunities to explore their own attitudes to their pupils' sexuality and learning needs.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to give concrete examples of what can be involved when teachers say that they find sex education 'difficult'. Using an extended description of an interaction that took place over several weeks between myself and a Year-9 tutor Helen, I have highlighted one of the reasons why the practice of sex education can be a difficult and messy task. Recounting my experience as both a practitioner and observer, I aimed to show how sex education can act as an interruption to the normal practice of teaching and how such interruptions are embodied. Goffman's metaphor was used to make sense of the stylised nature of Helen's behaviour and why talking about sex interrupted Helen's performance as a teacher who was knowledgeable and in control. Two examples were used to illustrate the moments in which Helen was left with no alternative script on which to draw and how those moments were managed. These interruptions were shown to be professionally and emotionally challenging in that they presented a threat to the coherence of her performance as a teacher as well as her

approach to sex/uality. As was shown in Helen's case, interruptions reveal the fragility of the habitual norm, not only to the audience but also to the individual. Such moments have the capacity to be productive in that they can trigger small but significant changes in the way in which those situations are understood. It was argued that such moments highlight the complex emotional aspect to the teaching of SRE and require careful handling if they are to have any positive impact. From this perspective, it was argued that attempts to change the practice of SRE should be about what is possible for individuals, not necessarily what is ideal and that the other roles played by teachers in their pupils lives should also be taken into account.

Chapter 5

Low opinions, high hopes: Exploring pupils' expectations of SRE

Introduction

The last two chapters have looked at some of the issues facing teachers and attempted to uncover the personal, professional and practical factors that contribute to their experience of sex education as a 'difficult' practice. The following two chapters continue to explore aspects of teacher/pupil relations and classroom interaction, turning attention towards pupils. This and the following chapter explore the question of how we are to account for the problems and inadequacies of SRE, each taking up a recurrent theme in the practice-based and theoretically-orientated literature. The theme of this chapter is the largely critical assessment of SRE given by pupils and the perception that teachers are unable or unwilling to address their concerns. Using material from a discussion group with female pupils from Charlesford School, this chapter explores the perception that perceived inadequacies in SRE are the fault of the teacher. Chapter 6 focuses on the issue of boys and their challenging and disruptive behaviour in the classroom. Through a reflection of my experiences of working with male pupils and teachers at Moorefield School the chapter challenges the widely held assumption that it is boys' behaviour that is the problem. Both chapters are concerned with issues of gender and the kinds of perceptions, assumptions and expectations that are attached to the gendered recipients of SRE. They are also concerned with the status of the accounts given about SRE, both from pupils and researchers/practitioners and suggest that we need to look beyond the surface of these accounts if we are to understand the underlying issues that generate problems and inadequacies in SRE.

SRE falling short

In Chapter 1, I indicated that much of the research on sex education has fallen within the 'new paradigm' of sociological research which aims to explore young peoples' perspectives on their everyday lives. In terms of sex education, this can be seen in the shift away from a preoccupation with the content of sex education programmes to an examination of how they are received (Allen 2005a; Buckingham and Bragg 2004; Buston and Wight 2002; Buston and Wight 2006; Buston et al. 2001; Epstein and

Johnson 1998; Forrest 2004; Kehily 2002; Measor 2004; Measor et al. 1996; Measor et al. 2000). As outlined in Chapter 1, young people have much to say about school-based sex education and are largely critical of the input they receive. Measor et al.'s (2000) extensive study of pupil attitudes to sex education gives a detailed account of their criticisms and reflects the findings of other studies that pupils find information insufficiently detailed and explicit and too narrowly constrained to issues of biology (for example Allen 2005a; Forrest et al. 2004). They also found pupils to be very critical of their teachers and in particular of the fact that they were unable to answer their questions or to adequately manage the behaviour of their peers. Measor et al. suggest that rather than pupils wishing to exclude adults from their world, pupils looked to them to provide information and support in areas of their lives that they find difficult (p.123). It was particularly important for the pupils in their study that this was done by an adult that they could 'trust'. Buston et al. (2002) also found that pupils attach great significance to their relationship with their teachers. More important than content, was teachers' ability to provide a safe and open environment and that being able to consider a teacher as more of a 'friend' was an important factor in whether or not pupils felt able to participate in class. Both studies highlighted pupils' dissatisfaction with current provision and indicated that this was tied up with feelings about individual teachers and whether young people felt able to talk to them about sensitive issues.

Measor et al. also show that pupils are negative about their teachers and the sex education they receive, even in schools where the programmes are 'innovative' and comprehensive (p.122). They point out that SRE that was delivered by specialist teachers and health workers, and that covered a wide range of topics in depth, was still derided by pupils for not giving them the kind of information they desired. The repeat criticism of 'I thought there would be more' was used against lessons which, in their eyes, failed to prepare them adequately for 'real' sexual relationships. This was described in terms of failing to address the 'how' questions such as, 'how to do it' and 'how it feels'. Allen (2005b) describes this as the failure to explore issues of 'corporeal sensuality' or to engage with the lived experience of sexual activity as it is conceptualised by young people themselves (p.43). Allen suggests that while pupils do not discount the information they receive from schools, they gave a much greater weight to the embodied knowledge gained from practical experience. For the older participants in Allen's research (age 16-18), engaging in sexual relationships was a far more

important way in which to gain knowledge about sex/uality. The younger pupils in Measor et al.'s study, however, seemed to attach great importance to the input they received from teachers and to have a strong sense of entitlement when it came to SRE. This was evident in the way their descriptions and opinions were articulated through strong feelings of frustration, disappointment and resentment and, as such their analysis was not just critical, it was also emotionally charged.

Evident in Measor et al.'s study and others, is that the discussion of sex education often gives rise to very strong feelings amongst pupils, with teaching practices and often teachers themselves made the object of hostile and antagonistic feelings. As described by Buston et al. (2002), the inadequacies of SRE are often understood by pupils to be the teacher's 'fault'. This has been taken as an indication of the failure of school-based sex education to meet pupils' needs or address their concerns. What has not been adequately explored however, is the issue of entitlement and the nature of the expectations on which pupils base their assessment. By taking pupils' opinions and experiences as a reflection of actual teaching practices, such explanations fail to engage with the ways in which stories about SRE are constructed within wider narratives of teacher/pupil relations in schools. There is also a failure to engage with the emotional aspect of their narratives; the hopes, fears and desires that are attached to SRE and its function in the inner world of young adolescents. This chapter aims to shed light on this issue by exploring the question of how the emotional aspects of these narratives might be interpreted.

To address this question, this chapter draws on material from a discussion group with six female pupils from Charlesford School. The pupils were all from a Year-9 class who had recently piloted a new and innovative SRE resource which dealt frankly and explicitly with a variety of issues. I had worked closely with their form tutor to coordinate the delivery and, after a number of conversations with individual pupils about their opinions, I was keen to find out what they thought about it in relation to sex education more generally. The class had been taught PSHE by several other teachers in addition to their form tutor, including an NQT on her teacher-training and a male teacher on long-term supply. It is apparent from the extracts that some members of the group were particularly vocal and confident while others were less vocal and in the case of one pupil, Shamila, only contributed once during the entire session. This is

indicative of the fact that, as in the classroom, pupils respond differently to the research context and not all pupils hold, or feel able to express strong opinions in relation to SRE. The group was ethnically diverse, but they did not raise issues of ethnicity or culture in relation to SRE and their criticisms tended to be much more general. This may also be indicative of the fact that, while ubiquitous within the peer group, as illustrated by Anita in Chapter 3, issues of sex/uality were rarely broached in relation to 'race' and ethnicity in the classroom.

This chapter explores how the group used the research context to construct a collective story of SRE. In particular, it highlights how pupils use their experiences of SRE to establish an identity in opposition to teachers, which emphasises distance and distain. Following the contours of the discussion, this chapter explores the inconsistencies, contradictions and the struggles within the group in their efforts to maintain a collective definition of the situation. Building on the findings of other evaluative studies, it focuses not so much on what is identified as problematic about the content of SRE, but on *how* their experiences are conveyed in the research context. Drawing on the psychoanalytic work of Salzberger-Wittenberg (1999), Henry (1999) and Youell (2006) on the emotional aspects of learning, I explore how pupils' reactions might be interpreted in terms of unconscious processes. Using the work of Gilber (2004; 2007) I suggest that their dismissive and contemptuous attitudes can also be understood as bound up with the desire for SRE to address and indeed solve some of the anxieties and difficulties these pupils face in their transition to adulthood. In this sense the pupils' narratives should be considered not just as ones of experience, but also of expectation.

Boredom, frustration and blame

The first part of the discussion was dominated by pupil thoughts about the teaching resource, mostly in response to questions put by me about its content, production and reception. They responded with muted enthusiasm, indicating that they thought the resource had been 'good' and they had enjoyed the opportunity to watch the drama and to talk about the characters. They had some reservations about the acting, but these were only communicated in response to direct questions from me about the quality of the resource. It was difficult to ascertain to what extent they were endorsing it as their responses where neither exalting nor damning. I had been particularly keen to incorporate the resource into the Year-9 PSHE programme because it dealt, amongst

other things, with the issue of sexual pressure from older men. This had become a key area of concern for Learning Mentors working with Year-9 pupils, particularly around the exchange of sexual favours for items such as mobile phones, clothes and cannabis. The positive sexual relationships and diversity of male characters in the drama also provided an opportunity to address some of these issues in a different light. In an all-girls' school in an area of high deprivation and high crime, it was often difficult to find the opportunity to talk about issues of sex/uality in positive and affirming ways. Given these points I had expected a more positive response and was surprised at their reserved and cautious comments.

When I asked them how they felt it compared to other sex education lessons they had received, they became much more animated. Familiar with this format they quickly took up positions that I had witnessed many times before.

Bernadette: When we get it now, it's like...

Tamika: [rolling her eyes] Over and over...

Bernadette: ...boring, do this sheet and do that sheet and it's like...

Diane: I don't want to sit there and just do writing.

Bernadette: It's not talking, it's just do this sheet. [Imitating the teacher] 'What do you think?' 'Here are the answers', it's like... [shrugs and makes a face as if she has seen it all before]

In line with the criticisms outlined in Chapter 1, Bernadette describes lessons as boring and repetitive, centred too much on the filling in of question and answer sheets. She bemoans the fact that they don't get to do any 'talking' which is seen to be a far more interesting and engaging activity. The tone of these comments is condescending, suggesting that teachers do not really know what they are doing. Bernadette is particularly dismissive in her manner, imitating the voice of a teacher trying to offer pupils some help. She emphasises her disdain for such efforts by going on to describe her experience of primary school, where, she boasts, they had received a sex education lesson 'every week'. This was not matched by anyone else in the group but they agreed that it had been 'much better' at primary school where learning was felt to be more 'fun'. Primary school is described as a place where the lessons were more personal and where they had been able to talk about a variety of issues in front of the class. The message was that lessons at secondary school did not have these qualities and had failed

to make an impact in the same way. When I asked them what they thought the point of SRE was at secondary school, they laughed and joked amongst themselves about the fact that none of them were really sure. From their response it seemed that the subject itself was generally considered to be a joke and that they were unable to answer my question was an illustration of this fact.

In this part of the conversation, primary school is used as a marker against which the failures of secondary school SRE are set. It is remembered as a place where lessons were 'fun' and teachers were people pupils could talk to. As described by Hargreaves et al. (2000), one of the key differences identified between primary and secondary school is the lack of emotional bonds between teachers and pupils. The differentiation of subjects and the division of the school timetable make it difficult for teachers to engage with their pupils in more personal ways. This is evident in the way in which fond feelings about primary school are set against the harshness of secondary school as a place where teachers are distant and uncaring. As illustrated in the extract above, this was understood to be connected to the fact that teachers relied on resources that failed to capture their attention. It was indeed true that most of the available resources for SRE were worksheet-based and this was as much a bone of contention for teachers as it was for pupils.

Of particular concern within the group was the fact that sex education lessons at secondary school were seen to be particularly risky places. The issue of gossip and the possibility of personal information becoming the subject of rumour was a major concern. This was particularly evident at Charlesford School where relationships taking place outside of school were frequently the subject of gossip inside school and would often erupt into open confrontation. As highlighted by Epstein and Johnson (1998), sexual reputation is of particular importance for female pupils where identities are defined by the sexual behaviour individuals are rumoured to have engaged in. Within this context, there was considerable concern about a lesson in which you were required to talk about personal issues.

> Diane: I think if you talk about personal stuff you should only talk about yourself and not like other people's stuff, cos it's like being rude.
>
> Melek: And if you start doing that, its like, if you want to talk to someone then, it's getting like shouted at in the whole class or whatever then you don't feel like you can actually talk to someone.
>
> Diane: And then it will spread, like, down the whole school.

In a similar way to that described by Buston et al. (2002), anxieties are articulated both in terms of the threat presented by peers and the lack of protection offered by teachers. Diane's suggestion that pupils should not talk about other people's 'personal stuff' was related to the concern that some pupils used the lesson as an opportunity to make comments or jokes about the sexual conduct of individuals. Melek's comment suggests that she feels that these issues are not understood by teachers, where attempts to conduct those conversations in private result in them getting told off. Getting 'shouted at' in front of your peers is not only humiliating but, as she also describes, leaves her feeling as if she cannot say anything at all.

What Melek does not draw attention to in this dialogue is that she was being told off by a teacher for having a private conversation in the middle of a lesson. As the conversation progressed, it became clear that a number of pupils also engaged in behaviour which they recognised was uncooperative. Tamika for example, admitted that they often talked during lessons simply because they were 'bored'. It was also suggested, with some laughter, that they deliberately struck up conversations in an effort to avoid having to complete worksheets. These statements were made defiantly as if this behaviour were no more than the teacher should expect. As Bernadette describes, she saw pupils' poor behaviour as the teacher's 'fault', as pupils could not be expected to concentrate when there was 'nothing to do'. Here again the group work to distance themselves from teachers by setting themselves outside of the normal school rules. When I ask them about the possible effects of their behaviour on the lesson, their response was defensive:

> Diane: But sometimes we talk about the work and they *still* tell us off for talking.
>
> Tamika: Yeah, it's like, [pointing] you asked me a question, it's like ... the specific question you asked them like, they go on to other things like...

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Bernadette: Yeah they don't answer the question they go on, [mimics] *'and sometimes, and sometimes...'*

The suggestion from Diane is that they are told off by teachers no matter what they do. Taking up a slightly different point, Tamika and Bernadette indicate that their behaviour is also related to their frustration at being ignored when they asked questions about sex. They both give examples of ways in which teachers try to avoid answering their questions by moving on to other topics. They were aware that some teachers were 'too shy' to talk about sex and that any questions put to them were liable to lead to embarrassment. This was a source of amusement but it was also the cause of frustration and resentment, evident in Tamika's accusation 'you asked me a question' delivered to an imaginary figure. After a pause, this is then rephrased in the third person as if she is aware how strongly this comes across. As further illustrated in the following comments, part of this frustration came from the fact that teachers' messages towards pupils were inconsistent. Attempts to avoid their questions were seen to contradict any efforts to be supportive:

Melek: It's like, they're clever enough to ask questions about like, if we have any *problems* or whatever.
Bernadette: Yeah, [mimics] *'Feel free to ask any questions...'*
Melek: Normally after you ask the question it's like, [mimics] *'after school'*, what's the point?

Here, teachers' efforts to create an open environment are interpreted as 'clever' attempts to deal with their inadequacies. Bernadette's sarcasm suggests that she sees straight though this duplicity and is not to be taken in by such blatant tactics. In an example referred to by Kehily (2002), teachers' attempts to form 'sisterly bonds' with pupils were interpreted as just 'plain nosey' (Wolpe in Kehily 2002:170). In a similar way, the efforts described by Melek and Bernadette to establish a more open relationship with pupils are greeted with suspicion and derision.

As described in research by Buckingham and Bragg (2004), many pupils see sex education as 'ridiculous' and an opportunity to 'muck about'. Other research has indicated that this attitude is far more common amongst male pupils, with female pupils widely reported to be more focused and compliant (Measor et al. 1996). Conversely,

not only do the girls in the discussion group admit to disruptive behaviour, but not concentrating, misbehaving and conducting private conversations are presented as justifiable reactions to the 'boredom' of the lesson. They describe themselves as victims of circumstances in which they have little choice other than to find alternative sources of entertainment and support. This manipulation of the situation suggests their behaviour is not just about boredom but that it is also being used as a punishment for teachers who have failed to address their concerns. That they blame teachers for this failure is exemplified in Tamika's accusatory finger-pointing at an imaginary teacher.

Adolescence, injustice and empathy

The situations the girls describe certainly seem frustrating and it is not unreasonable to expect that this kind of response would leave pupils feeling unmotivated and resentful. Normally this is interpreted in terms of the failure of teachers to deliver lessons that capture the attention of pupils. But the enthusiasm with which they worked to denigrate their teachers prompted me to reconsider the story that was being presented. In this particular case, my attention was alerted because I was aware that their teachers were, in fact, more than usually supportive and that, in comparison to many other classes in the school, they had had the opportunity to cover a wide variety of issues and concerns through the piloting of the new teaching resource. With this knowledge, their responses seemed disproportionately negative and perhaps also unkind, given how enthusiastically their teacher had approached it.

According to Salzberger-Wittenberg (1999), such negative reactions to teachers and to learning are common. As she points out, pupils' hostility towards teachers and the lengths to which some pupils will go to make them feel worthless, are well documented – not least in relation to SRE. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this is because the attachments pupils form with their teachers are understood to have their roots in childhood and the relationship between parent and child in early infancy. As parent-like figures, teachers are seen to hold an important position in the mental life of pupils and are invested with very strong positive and negative feelings (Henry 1999; Salzberger-Wittenburg 1999; Youell 2006). Pupils' behaviour towards their teachers is interpreted in terms of their emotional needs and the conscious and unconscious desire for them to replicate, repudiate or compensate for attachments developed in infancy (ibid.). As such, teachers can become the object of pupils' desire for knowledge and

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need for comfort or stability – and thus an object of admiration and desire – and of rejection and denigration when emotional needs are not met (ibid.). It is this connection to parental relationships and past experiences which are seen to contribute to the turbulence and antagonism that are often characteristic of pupils' relationship to their teachers.

There are many ways in which their comments about teachers and the tone with which they were delivered reflected those associated with young peoples' relationships with their parents. This includes their descriptions of being ignored or unnecessarily told off and their rejection of any efforts to try to form more familiar bonds. In a way typically associated with adolescents, they saw their teachers' behaviour as 'unfair' and as reflecting a lack of understanding about what they were going through. The suggestion by Tamika and Bernadette that teachers were deliberately avoiding answering their questions was taken up by other members of the group as an opportunity to share their own experiences. These anecdotes were often animated as they compared their supposed vendettas, enjoying the opportunity to air their grievances in the public forum of research. Bernadette, for example, talked in detail about what she saw to be the overly authoritarian approach of one particular teacher whose behaviour was seen to be so extreme and incomprehensible that there must be something 'wrong' with him. In doing so he was positioned, along with other teachers, in a position of opposition. This was the pupils' response to a question from me about why they thought teachers might behave in that way:

> Tamika: They've got more power than us…
> Melek: More knowledge and stuff.
> Tamika: More power that's the thing. Some teachers take it like any little, *little* thing they'll take it like, ah you're doing something wrong, detention! It's like they take detention as like a little thing to get children scared or something, and stuff like that so… If you start shouting, Detention! Da, da, daa, detention, it's like …
> Diane: You can't say anything.
> Tamika: If you try and like, put your point across it's like, ah detention!
> Melek: You just get in more trouble.

Here, the teacher's authority is interpreted as an abuse of power where any attempt to engage in the lesson only gets pupils in to more trouble. Their behaviour is seen to be

blown out of proportion by teachers who react to the 'little little things' they get up to in class. According to Salzberger-Wittenberg (1999), feeling angry and cheated are common reactions when pupils feel that they are being denied access to information to which they feel entitled. As with the suspicions children harbour in relation to their parents, there is often the belief that teachers are 'deliberately and meanly' denying them access to information as a way to keep them 'relegated to a state of ignorance and impotence' (p.26). This is evident in the fact that the behaviour of teachers in PSHE classes is interpreted not just as withholding information, but as a calculated attempt to infantilise them. From this perspective, the sense of having been cheated was not just about having their questions ignored but about feeling excluded from the adult realm of sexuality that their questions were designed to address.

As illustrated by Melek's comment in the last extract, there were occasions in the dialogue when pupils offered alternative interpretations of events. In between Tamika's description of teachers' authoritarian behaviour, Melek suggests that perhaps teachers behaved in that way because they were more knowledgeable. This draws on the idea that teachers' behaviour is not so much authoritarian, as insisted by Tamika, but a legitimate expression of their position of authority. After the intensity of this exchange had died down, Bernadette suggested in a much more considered tone that perhaps there was another motive for this behaviour which had not yet been considered. As someone who had been responsible for inflaming the idea that teachers were deliberately vindictive, this represented a significant shift in the direction of the conversation.

> Bernadette: I don't think some of the teachers are comfortable with some of the questions.
> Diane: [thoughtfully] No...
> Bernadette: And it's understandable – if they're not comfortable. But it's like ... and its like ... I don't think you should teach that particular topic if you don't feel comfortable anyway, like, what's the pupil going to get out of it, do you know what I mean?

The possibility that some teachers may actually find answering pupils' questions uncomfortable introduced an entirely different definition of the situation. Being uncomfortable with the issues implied that, not only were teachers not inherently vindictive, but there was the possibility that they were also human. If their inability to answer questions was related to their own embarrassment and not to any deliberate plot, then it was also possible that their attempts to work with pupils were genuine. This

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moment of empathy is then quickly shut off by Bernadette's insistence that while their discomfort was 'understandable' this did not make it excusable. As she goes on to state, teachers who were not comfortable with the content should simply not be allowed to teach it. This was quickly affirmed by other members of the group who agreed that some teachers were just 'too shy' to be up to the job.

This was one of the few moments in the dialogue in which individuals were willing to consider a different interpretation of events. On the whole, relationships that were supposed to be supportive, nurturing and enlightening were being experienced as divisive, hostile and exclusionary. This was seen to be a great injustice, as if pupils were being denied access not only to information about sex but also to adulthood.

Moments of ambivalence

The following exchange came at a point during the discussion when the group were comparing teachers' reactions to their questions and the different tactics used to avoid answering them. At this point in the discussion, Tamika turned to ask for my opinion on an incident that had recently taken place in class. Despite not mentioning any names, it was clear from the way in which Tamika put the question that the incident was well known within the group. I could see from their response that there was a certain amount of excitement at being able to divulge this story to me and that it had become a valuable source of gossip. I was sufficiently familiar with pupils' perceptions of this teacher to be able to identify who it was and, from the smirks and sly glances that passed between them, could make an educated guess as to what it was they were referring to.

> Tamika: Polly can I ask you a question? We did ask one teacher and she got... she took it personal, *very* personal.
> Melek: She took it personal [laughs].
> Tamika: Yeah tooooo personal.
> PH: And why do you think she took it so personally?
> Tamika: I really don't know. [this is said in a mock-innocent voice that indicates that obviously she does]
> Bernadette: We don't know....[smirking]. It's because like everyone *knows* ...so...
> Tamika: I don't '*know*', it's people's opinions.
> Diane: What teacher?

[laughter]

Melek: You know!

Tamika: You're not allowed to say names

Melek: Yeah yeah basically.... [folds her arms and looks at the ceiling innocently]

The 'it' in this discussion is a reference to a question about homosexuality put to a teacher who was widely rumoured amongst pupils and known amongst staff to be a lesbian. Whether Tamika's question was innocent or provocative is ambiguous, but it is clear from the gestures and laughter from others in the group that it had been interpreted by the teacher as the latter. In this incident, the teacher had obviously responded to Tamika's question in a way that betrayed her feelings of vulnerability to the class. This slip had been interpreted by the group as a triumph in that it had allowed them a forbidden glimpse in her private life. As described by Waddell (2002), adolescence is characterised by an eager sexual curiosity and it is common for this to be directed towards the private lives of teachers. In the case of this particular teacher, this information was all the more valuable because of the speculation and intrigue surrounding her sexuality. Talking about the incident had aroused that sense of excitement and satisfaction at having temporarily shifted the balance of power.

According to Kehily and Nayak (1996), the playing out of sexual narratives can be interpreted in a variety of ways; as acts of resistance, moments of disruption, the reclaiming of power, affirming a collective identity, or simply sharing a funny story. In the re-telling of this incident the group sought to affirm their collective identity by re-enacting the moment in which they had managed to disrupt the normal power relations of the lesson. This was clearly considered to be amusing, but it was also an example of their ability to tap into their teacher's vulnerability. While of great entertainment value, it was evident that this version of the story did not unite the group against the teacher in any clear-cut way. Bernadette and Melek appeared to revel in the opportunity to display their knowledge of teachers' personal lives, but Tamika seemed less comfortable with associating herself with this approach. This can be seen in the way in which she tries to distance herself from Bernadette's rather smug assertion that 'everybody *knows'* by saying that it was not common knowledge, only 'people's opinions'. And again after Melek's comment to Diane which seemed as if it might reveal her identity, Tamika steps in to demand that the group do not say her name. Despite having raised the issue

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initially, it is Tamika who steps in to protect her teacher from this salacious interpretation by denying her sexuality and resisting her exposure.

As the discussion progresses it is revealed that Tamika's question to the teacher had been followed by a number of other apparently 'innocent' questions and private exchanges which had resulted in the teacher losing her temper and sending a pupil out of class. While for some members of the group this was seen to be even further evidence of their success, this was followed by some disagreement over whether the incident had actually been 'funny'. The sense of triumph and delight at having uncovered such valuable information hung heavy with the realisation of how angry and possibly upset it had made their teacher feel. As they started to dissect the incident the 'celebratory aspect' (Kehily and Nayak 1996) of the story became visibly tainted by the fact that they were unsure about presenting their role in this way. The tensions that existed between having uncovered something secret and having to acknowledge its significance is illustrated in the following extract.

> PH: So sometimes.... So are you saying it is better for teachers to give their personal opinions?
> Bernadette: Sometimes if you ask for it like, but not... if it wasn't a question about herself she shouldn't give her opinion. It's her, like, body, but the questions like about what we're trying to learn she shouldn't have been ... she shouldn't have got like that because that's...
> Shamilla: It's like if you talk about gay people it's like she gets offended or something.
> Bernadette: Yeah it's really weird.
> Melek: It's probably kids like...
> Tamika: You have to be careful what you say around teachers sometimes...

This extract illustrates that while pupils may seek and gain enjoyment from such moments, this is accompanied by the desire for teachers not to take them too seriously. Bernadette suggests that her teacher should 'not have got like that', i.e. that she should not have taken their comments to heart, but she is unable to fully articulate why. Avoiding the fact that the pupils had collectively goaded the teacher into her final outburst Bernadette dismisses the reaction as inappropriate. They were only 'trying to learn' and therefore the teacher need not have taken it so personally. But, as illustrated by Melek's comment that it was 'probably kids', they were fully aware of pupils' capacity to manipulate such situations by drawing on sensitive or taboo subject such as

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homosexuality. Also evident in this exchange is that incidents that are described as funny and entertaining can also evoke feelings that are more ambivalent and even painful. That the students were not all comfortable with this interpretation of events, or with sharing it in such a self-satisfied way, is evident in the feelings of guilt. Amidst the triumph, it was also evident that this was also a story of betrayal.

So far in this chapter I have illustrated some of the negative ways in which pupils describe their experience of SRE. As shown in relation to specific moments in the discussion, their narratives are often highly charged and are delivered in ways that suggest a high level of emotional involvement. I have suggested that the strength of these feelings, and the vehemence with which they sought to denigrate their teachers, needs to be understood as something more that just a reflection of the practices of teachers themselves. This was made evident to me in the case of this Year-9 class because of my own knowledge of their teachers and of the SRE they had received. As illustrated in the last section, pupils are aware of their culpability in the situations they describe, but that this is not the whole story. I have shown that even incidents that appear entertaining may carry deeper feelings of guilt associated with the public betrayal of teachers for whom pupils have mixed feelings and, in many cases, hold in high esteem. As such, their assessment and interpretation of their experiences of SRE need to be understood as a response to the expectations against which their teachers were being measured. This is explored further in the following part of this chapter.

High hopes and multiple expectations

According to Henry (1999), it is important not to assume that the stories pupils tell about their teachers have a direct relationship to actual events. How interactions are interpreted by pupils may have as much to do with their own expectations of adult relationships and what they represent, as with the actual behaviour of those individuals (ibid.). If these are not just narratives of experience, then it is important to ask what *kind* of emotional involvement would lead pupils to depict those relationships in a certain way. One of the ways to understand this relationship is through the psychoanalytic concept of transference; the idea that pupils perceive and interpret their interactions with teachers in ways that are shaped by past relationships and experiences with their parents. From this perspective, teachers take the place of parent figures in the pupils' unconscious which, as Henry points out, is often illustrated by the fact that

pupils talk about their teachers in ways that are reminiscent of how they talk about their parents. This was particularly evident in the moments in the discussion in which pupils' expectations of their teachers were brought more clearly to the surface. In these moments, it became clear that they had specific ideas about what their 'job' as SRE teachers involved.

According to Salzberger-Wittenberg (1999), pupils' expectations are shaped by the kinds of roles they need their teachers to fulfil. While it is certainly realistic for pupils to expect a teacher to have more knowledge about the subject they are teaching than the pupils coming to learn from them she argues, many children come to school with the expectation that teachers will have 'an encyclopaedic mind' which 'pours out facts and information' (p.25). As parent figures, teacher are expected by pupils not just to have 'unlimited knowledge' but to also provide other kinds of support, such as comfort, stability and understanding. It was apparent from their exchanges that teachers were expected to provide both knowledge and emotional support when it came to SRE. They indicated on a number of different occasions, for example, that teachers were expected to know the answer to any of their questions simply because they were teachers. This was not an expectation that they should be 'experts' necessarily, but that they should know the answers to questions because that was their job:

> Melek: Well if you think about it yeah, they're at the top, if um... if a student is asking
> questions right, and they really need to know about it, cos they're at that age or whatever, they
> should, and they're actually taking, they're taking a role of taking that lesson because they
> want to – it's their job and everything, they should be up to answering anything that is thrown
> at them.

Here, the expectation that teachers are 'all-knowing' is linked to their position within the school hierarchy. By being 'at the top' Melek suggests, they have a responsibility to answer 'anything that is thrown at them'. From this perspective, pupils don't distinguish questions about sex/uality from other curriculum subjects. Having chosen their role as teachers, it is assumed and expected that they were aware of this aspect of their responsibility. What becomes clear in the following comments was that as adults in a position of authority, they were expected to have the experiential knowledge to qualify them for the task. As Tamika insists, 'they've gone through it, so they should

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know'. With this in mind, the fact that teachers do not answer their questions is a source of great frustration:

> Bernadette: Yeah, and it comes again yeah; you're adult we're a child but you're teaching a child, you're supposed to answer it. You *know*, that's part of your job. You know we're going to be younger than you so you should have thought about that first.
> Melek: And if they've already gone through our age yeah then, and everything we've done whatever – not saying anything [laughter] – only joking! But they should actually relate to us.
> PH: Right so it's their job basically to be the ones with the knowledge to answer the questions?
> Tamika: Yeah, act like a parent to us.

What becomes apparent from this extract is that, rather than wanting to distance themselves from their teachers, they actually expect them to play a far more central role. This is encapsulated in Tamika's comment that they are expected to act 'like parents'. It is taken as common sense that, having been through that period, adults will know what it is like and it is part of their 'job' to pass on the benefits of that experience. This desire for adults to take a more authoritative role when it comes to the concerns suggests that the enthusiasm with which they sought to denigrate their teachers conceals something much more fragile. As Salzberger-Wittenberg points out, finding out that teachers do not in fact know everything, nor are they able to adequately deal with their 'puzzlement about the world' can be a huge disappointment (p.28). Rather than idealising teachers, she suggests, this can lead pupils to denigrate them by insisting that they are 'stupid and ignorant and have nothing to offer' (ibid.). As illustrated in these extracts, teachers were expected to have particular qualities and knowledge by virtue of their roles as adults in positions of authority. The attempts to disparage their teachers might also be understood as a response to their disappointment at finding out that they were unable to live up to these expectations.

That teachers were being held in an impossible position was further illustrated in the conversation that followed. When discussing who they did feel able to talk to about sex, it became apparent that none of the pupils in fact had an 'open' relationship with their parents, nor had they received any significant information from them about sex. They described turning to cousins, siblings and neighbours after finding that their parents were too embarrassed or too busy to talk to them. In that sense, they were

expecting teachers not to replicate their own parents, but to compensate for areas in which they were found wanting. From this perspective, it was not real live parents that Tamika was referring to, but something else; a kind of 'dream figure', a longed for parent with the ability to understand and meet their every need. As described by Henry (1999), there were expectations for teachers to be 'superhuman', for them to be able to meet all pupils' needs without any interference from their own (p.80). From this perspective, the expectations that teachers would behave 'like parents' was not only unrealistic but also impossible. By demanding that such expectations be met, pupils were routinely setting their teachers up to fail.

In response to these outbursts I asked them to think about what it was they would *like* their teachers to be doing if they were not happy with the current approach. Emotions were running high at this point and Bernadette, still wound up, responded immediately:

> Bernadette: Motivating us, stop spitefulling us!
> Diane: Stop saying we're national curriculum when they're making it up!

Bernadette's declaration captures her anger and resentment at having been treated in a way that she saw to be vindictive, but it also captures her desire for an engagement that is more meaningful. The appeal for teachers to start 'motivating us' illustrates that, far from being unconcerned about their behaviour and disconnected from the lessons, she was in fact desperate for her teachers to step up to the mark. Diane's reference to the national curriculum relates to a previous discussion in which they had talked about a particular teacher's use of the national curriculum levels to categorise their behaviour. They describe a situation in which a teacher, in an attempt to get them to behave properly had told them that they were 'not level 3 anymore' – i.e. primary school level – and therefore should know how to behave. As illustrated by Diane's impassioned plea to stop referring to them in this way, this was not a welcome response. As Gilber (2007) points out, appeals to an adolescent's sense of authority (in this case to their ability to handle sexual material in a 'mature' way), will always run the risk of inciting a concomitant 'acting out' (p.54). This, Gilber argues, is because adolescents' relationships with authority are ambivalent and any appeals to their internal conscience are conjuring up 'an unstable and psychically combustible dynamic' (ibid.). The fierce

reaction from both Diane and others against such appeals to take responsibility for their behaviour can be seen as an example of this volatility.

Diane's reference to the national curriculum also points to a much wider tension at the heart of this discussion which relates to the way in which pupils position themselves in relation to the subject of SRE. As described at the start of this chapter, girls are considered to be more mature than their male peers and much better behaved during SRE. As illustrated in the example above, teachers may use this assumption of maturity to manage and police their behaviour. But evident in the comments was that doing so tapped in to the uncertainty and ambiguity that many of them felt about exactly how they wished to be approached. While they were all adamant that they did not want to be talked down to, they were also uncertain about the extent to which they wanted to be treated as 'grown up'. Bernadette's comment, 'we're the children you're the adult', for example, was a request for teachers to recognise their youth and inexperience. There was also tension evident in their plea for teachers to make lessons 'fun'; a desire which had been located in their memories of primary school as a place where learning was not tied down by the rigid structures and demands of adult life. This tension between not wanting to be treated like a child and yet wanting to be taught in a way that nurtured the feelings associated with childhood, illustrates the conflictual and confused nature of the emotional needs they were demanding to be met. This was particularly evident in the continual shifts between expressions of closeness ('like parents') and distance ('feel free to ask any questions') symbolic of their uncertain position between childhood and adulthood. In that sense, while they had very fixed expectations about teachers' roles in relation to SRE, pupils were very uncertain about how they wished to be positioned within it. From this perspective, teachers were in a no-win situation.

Expectations and the challenge of SRE

The insights drawn on so far have been used to suggest that pupils' negative assessments of SRE can be understood through the concept of transference and the expectations pupil have of their parents. The denigration of teachers has been understood to conceal deep-seated resentment that such expectations are not being met, though it has been argued that these expectations are unrealistic. These insights relate to an understanding of teachers as 'parent figures' in the general sense. There is still a question as to whether there is also something particular about SRE which separates it

from other subjects and the expectations pupils have of their teachers in that role. As described in Chapter 1, from a psychoanalytic perspective, adolescence is a period of transition in which young people must adjust to the physical and emotional changes relating to sexuality. This is a period characterised by struggle, in which attempts to break out of the constrictions on sexuality imposed in childhood can feel both compelling and alarming (Waddell 2002). Adolescence is also understood to be characterised by loss where, in order to invent 'new selves', passionate attachments to parents must be given up (Gilber 2007:54). According to Gilber, it is the challenging nature of these tasks on the cusp of childhood and adulthood, that makes sex education so problematic:

> Sex education is larger than just information, affirmation or prohibition. In its address to the most intimate aspects of life – love, loss, vulnerability, power, friendship, aggression – sex education is necessarily entangled in the adolescent's efforts to construct a self, find love outside the family, enjoy one's own newly adult body; in short, various relationships that might cautiously be called 'developmental'. (p.49)

For Gilber, it is this entanglement that separates sex education, and those who teach it, from maths or geography in the pupil's mind. As described by one of the teachers in my research, it is because it is 'an important subject for *them*'. From this perspective, early adolescence is seen to be a 'crucial' time of 'inevitable turmoil and confused identity' – 'crucial', according to Waddell, because the undergoing of turmoil and confusion is an important and necessary aspect of the adolescent process (Waddell 2002:148). Where relationships with teachers are subject to the extremes of 'love and hate, derision and neediness and idealization and disparagement' (Gilber 2007:53), they can be seen to take on a particular ferocity when it comes to sex education because of the way in which it is bound up, in promise at least, with the 'developmental' tasks of adolescence. As has been indicated in this and other chapters in this thesis, pupils have numerous questions and significant concerns about sex/uality that they wish to be addressed. Psychoanalytic theory suggests that there are also numerous unconscious desires, needs and anxieties associated with the adolescent process which may not be articulated verbally but through other forms of communication. This presents a very precarious situation for teachers of sex education who are unwittingly invested with the task of addressing concerns they may not even be aware of. With such high

expectations and unarticulated desires it is unsurprising that teachers are, more often than not, found wanting.

This is not to say that all pupils will have turbulent relationships with their teachers nor will they all choose to denigrate them to the extent that some of the pupils do in this chapter. As with Shamila, many pupils refrain from speaking about their teachers in this way, or from participating in the kind of behaviour or exchanges that they describe. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this should not be understood to indicate a lack of turmoil. Even 'excessive agreeableness' (Joseph cited in Gilber 2007:54) is understood to be a common form of adolescent revolt (Gilber 2007).

Conclusion

The material presented in this chapter has been used to explore common perceptions about pupils' experiences of SRE. As indicated in reference to research by Measor et al. (2000), there is an assumption that pupils are negative about sex education as a result of inadequate provision from their teachers. Using examples from a discussion with a group of Year-9 pupils, I have suggested that how pupils talk about their experiences of sex education requires that we consider a different interpretation of their accounts. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, I have suggested that, by paying attention to the emotional aspects of these narratives, it is possible to uncover other motivations for negative accounts of SRE. In particular, I have identified the tensions between childhood and adulthood, closeness and distance, wanting to know and wanting to appear knowledgeable. From this perspective, I have argued that pupil behaviour can be seen as a function of the inevitable disappointment and resentment that comes from the unrealistic expectation that sex education will answer the difficult and challenging questions of adolescence. Drawing on the insights of psychoanalytic theory there are several implications for the teaching of SRE of seeing pupils' behaviour in these terms. Firstly, that understanding pupils' expectations of SRE as unrealistic may help teachers to better assess their own contributions and to persevere where they might otherwise give up. As Salzberger-Wittenberg points out, by not trying to always meet those expectations (and ultimately failing) teachers can better enable pupils to adjust their expectations and to make more reasonable assessments in future. Secondly, seeing themselves as objects of pupils' transference can help teachers to get a more objective view of their behaviour where 'the suspiciousness and hostility of a student may be less

readily felt as a personal attack' (p.36). By understanding pupils' behaviour as a manifestation of internal struggles and negative feelings about themselves, teachers can avoid, or better manage, confrontational relationships (ibid). Thirdly, seeing pupils' criticisms as a product of their disappointment, rather than as a rejection of the teacher themselves, may help to reaffirm to teachers that their role is important. Knowing that pupils are, on the whole, desperate to learn about sex and invest a great deal in teachers' authority, may help them to retain some level of confidence and enthusiasm for their role despite the negative responses they often encounter. As such, one of the difficulties of SRE is that teachers must confront the internal conflicts pupils experience in their transition to adulthood. When thinking about how to make sense of pupils' narratives of SRE, it is therefore important to give consideration to the emotions invested in those narratives.

Chapter 6

Sex education and masculinity: The 'problem' of boys

This chapter continues with the theme of Chapter 5 – how to account for the problems and inadequacies of sex education. In the previous chapter, I explored the perception amongst young people that it is teachers who are at fault for not answering pupils' questions and failing to address their concerns. I suggested that pupils' negative assessment of teachers needed to be understood in the context of the high expectations they had of sex education to meet their adolescent concerns. In this chapter, I continue with the theme of teacher/pupil relationships by exploring the common perception that it is boys who are the problem for sex education and sex educators. Much has been written about the disruptive behaviour of male pupils and of the importance (or not) of tailoring sex education programmes to meet their needs. The 'problem' boys present for sex education has been understood as both an issue of masculinity and of the failure of schools to adequately address the needs of male pupils. This chapter takes up these two currents in the literature to examine my experience of working with Year 8 and 9 pupils at Moorefield School. According to Frosh et al. (2002), there is a tendency in the literature on boys and schooling to focus on particular enactments of masculinity and to reproduce examples of aggressive and competitive assertions in the text. By focusing on the deconstruction of masculine norms, they argue, there is also a danger of perpetuating the very practices they seek to critique. Following Frosh et al., this chapter aims to avoid this pattern by exploring examples in which boys appeared to inhabit alternative or 'not necessarily subordinate' masculinities (p.73). Being attentive to ways, contexts and times in which these enactments became possible, this chapter explores whether we can learn anything different about the 'problem' of boys and sex education by examining their behaviour in the classroom.

Boys as *the* problem for sex education

It is not possible to talk about what is 'difficult' about addressing issues of sex/uality in schools, without addressing the question of boys and young men. As described by Biddulph (2007), the relationship between young men and SRE over the last decade has been characterised by a history of problematising (p.24). This can be seen in the

marked shift in emphasis away from how to address the needs of girls, to how to tackle the 'problem' of boys' lack of engagement and poor behaviour in class. This shift can be seen as part of a wider trend in gender and education research described by Weaver-Hightower (2003) as 'the boy turn'. In light of the 'moral panic' about the socialisation and under achievement of boys (Frosh et al. 2002), the focus in literature since the mid 1990s has been much more on addressing their learning, social outcomes and schooling experiences (Weaver-Hightower 2003). This 'turn' Weaver-Hightower points out, contains many discontinuities and has been seen as both timely and necessary, as well as divisive and deeply problematic (p.472). While there are some areas of disagreement within the literature on sex education over exactly what the 'issue' surrounding boys is and how best to tackle it, the sense that boys are themselves a significant and persistent factor in a much wider problem is well-entrenched. The recent inclusion of the 'problem' of male pupils in policy documents (see Hilton 2001; 2007) suggests that professional attention, training and resources may soon follow suit (Weaver-Hightower 2003). As such, boys are also recognised as the 'problem' at an institutional level.

Much has been written about the difficulties boys present for the sex educator and the delivery of sex education (Allen 2006; Buston and Hart 2001; Buston and Wight 2006; Buston, et al. 2002; Davidson 1996; Epstein and Johnson 1998; Hilton 2001; Hilton 2007; Kehily 2002; Lees 1994; Measor, et al. 1996; Measor, et al. 2000). According to Forrest, boys continue to receive a very bad press where their behaviour is most commonly presented as 'homophobic, misogynist, uncommunicative and immature' (unpublished paper quoted in Hilton 2007 p.162). In comparison to girls, boys are seen to be more disruptive in the classroom, making it difficult for teachers to deliver lessons, as well as impacting negatively on the learning opportunities of other pupils (Measor, et al. 1996). Other research has pointed to the high incidence of violence and coercion exerted by boys in heterosexual relationships (Holland et al. 1993; 1998) as well as the bullying and homophobia suffered by gay and other subordinate or non-macho males (Epstein 1997). As described by Forrest (2007), boys are also a major concern for sexual health providers in that they are much less likely to access sexual health services, have lower levels of factual knowledge about sexual health and a much higher incidence of risk-taking behaviour. These behavioural patterns according to Epstein (1997) are not just a problem for those on the receiving end of such macho displays (teachers, female pupils and subordinate males) they are also a problem for the

boys themselves. In that sense, boys are in many ways considered to be *the* problem for sex education, if not also for society as a whole (ibid).

As highlighted in Chapter 1, research that has attempted to engage with young men about their experiences of sex education suggests that boys' behaviour is a reflection of the failure of school-based sex education to meet their needs. Such research suggests a need for teaching practices that are more 'boy-friendly' (Blake 2004; Biddulph 2007) as well as for subject content that more accurately reflects their concerns (Allen 2006; Buston and Wight 2006; Hilton 2001; 2007; Measor 2000). The issue of how to meet boys' needs is increasingly addressed in both academic and practice-based literature in terms of understanding the pressures young men face in developing their masculine identities (Allen 2005; Frosh, et al. 2002; Haywood 1996; Mac an Ghaill 1994). This research has also drawn attention to the multiplicity of masculine identity and the role of context in shaping which masculine identities young men take up. Research has indicated that young men are aware of these pressures and are conscious of their efforts to perform particular kinds of masculinity (Allen 2006; Buston and Wight 2006). Walker and Kushner (1997) describe this in terms of 'liminal self work' where young men simultaneously develop distinct and often contradictory public and private selves (p.8). Understanding this 'double world' (Blake 2004) is seen to be key to providing young men with the kind of support that would enable them to speak openly about emotional issues without 'losing face'. According to Blake (ibid.), we know that young men want the opportunity to explore emotional issues. The question for educators is how to provide the right kind of environment to enable them to do so.

This chapter engages with the perception that boys' behaviour is a problem, but it aims to do so with an awareness of what Thorne describes as the 'Big Man Bias'; the tendency in theoretically orientated research to focus on the most visible males, the 'bad boys – or most successful boys – 'as if they are representative of *all* males' (Thorne in Weaver-Hightower 2003:484). As explained in the opening to this chapter, there are many illustrations in research of quite how 'problematic' the behaviour of young men can be and while I came across many incidents that confirmed this assessment, I have chosen not to focus on those incidents in this chapter. As described in Chapter 2, this is a conscious decision to tell a particular kind of story; not one that glosses over or attempts to conceal the difficult and troubling aspects of masculinity and the behaviour

of male pupils, but one that attempts to address that behaviour from a different perspective. As such it focuses on those moments in my research in which male behaviour troubled not only the normative perceptions of masculine identity enactment but also my own perceptions, judgements and sensitivities as a 'liberal', trained sex educator. This is done by drawing on examples from my experience at Moorefield School, which give localised accounts of specific interactions with pupils and teachers. Drawing on the method of autoethnography described in Chapter 2, these examples are designed to illustrate the complexity of lived experience by focusing on my emotional involvement in those interactions as a practitioner and a researcher. These examples are explored under three headings; the expectations of teachers, the role of pornography and masculinity and homophobia. These headings represent key areas of attention and debate in the literature that were of particular interest to me in the course of my research. Each of these areas has been explored in some detail elsewhere and my aim is not to provide answers to, or detailed analysis of the debates, but to use them to explore the 'problem' of boys in relation to my own research. As illustrated in this chapter, 'comfortable' certainties of gender difference, based on a normative heterosexual masculinity, have become entrenched in both research and practice in ways that are unhelpful and exclusionary. As such, the argument made in this chapter is that we need to switch the terms of the debate away from the behaviour of boys to the relationships between their behaviour and expectations of adults.

The expectations of teachers

As described in Chapter 1, literature on sexuality and schooling has focused on schools as sites of cultural production in which educational practices as well as pupil cultures are seen to shape the meanings attached to gender and sexuality (Epstein and Johnson 1998; Kehily 2002; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Redman 1994). From this perspective, schools and teachers not only reproduce dominant discourses but actively produce sex-gender identities through the construction and policing of symbolic boundaries. Kehily (2002), for example, shows how one particular teacher's behaviour (that of Mr Carlton) towards his male pupils, was shaped by his own experiences of adolescence. Certain forms of hegemonic masculinity were privileged and naturalised through Mr Carlton's assumption that certain ways of behaving towards girls were a product of how boys 'are'. Other researchers have made the expectations of teachers evident through their descriptions of their interactions around the research process itself. Frosh et al. (2002)

for example, describe teachers' 'surprise' when, wishing to conduct hour-long interviews with male pupils, they were informed that pupils would not be able to concentrate. The boys themselves were then delivered a severe warning by teachers, in front of the researchers, about the consequences of any misbehaviour. In a similar way, Allen (2006) describes being warned by a senior teacher at a faith school about the sexual preoccupations of the young men who had agreed to participate in her research. 'They'll want to know how to have sex and see pictures of people doing it' was delivered both as a humorous gesture between two female adults and a thinly veiled caution about what was to come (p.69). In this way researchers have drawn attention to the ways in which teachers' interactions with pupils are shaped by normative discourses of masculinity. According to Biddulph (2007), while the 1990s was supposedly the era of the 'New Man', very little has changed in terms of the perceptions of young men as emotionally illiterate and uninterested in their emotional lives. As many have pointed out, this is despite the fact that high rates of suicide and mental health problems amongst young men are stark indicators of their emotional needs (Hilton 2007).

These expectations took on a very particular shape in relation to Moorefield School because of its reputation and association with a particular kind of working-class masculinity. As described in Chapter 2, during 2004-5 when I worked at the school, it had recently failed 'Special Measures' and was due for closure the following year. In addition to its poor academic record, it was an all-boys school located in an area that was a well-known 'hot spot' for violent crime, including gang-related gun crime and the use and sale of crack cocaine. Having had central government money poured into the school in recent years, seemingly with little effect, it was widely considered to be a lost cause. As a local resident I was well aware of the reputation that accompanied the fairly innocuous school uniform and the assumption that Moorefield boys were 'up to no good'. This was also made very clear to me in the reactions of some of the staff at Charlesford Girls School who looked on my placement there with a mixture of awe and sympathy. The implication was that attempts to conduct sex education work in Moorefield were both challenging and futile.

Despite the widespread concern about the lack of sex education being delivered at the school, there was also a widely expressed assumption that the pupils knew 'too much' when it came to sex. One of the programmes I carried out at Moorefield involved

delivering a basic SRE programme to Year 8 pupils and, as described in Chapter 2, the combination of severe managerial problems and challenging behaviour from pupils meant that sex education was something that was generally not done. With the school due for closure, there was no pressure to carry out any form of PSHE and teachers had opted instead to direct their time to 'core' subjects. Given this fact it was perhaps surprising that the senior teacher, an Asian man in his mid-50s, who escorted me to my first Year 8 class, was quick to warn me that the pupils were 'very precocious' and no doubt 'knew it all already'. This was not motivated by a desire to share information with a professional about the pupils' learning needs, but to prepare a young, white, middle-class woman for the inevitable 'shock' of a class full of 12-year-old boys. The assumption that they would misbehave, use language inappropriately and ask rude and explicit questions was reiterated in his address to the class when we arrived. This was delivered in no uncertain terms as an issue of discipline; of restraining their behaviour in front of their visitor or accepting the consequences. In this address, I was the person for whom their otherwise unbridled masculine urges were to be tamed, their 'precocious' knowledge to be kept to themselves. His direct address contrasted strongly with the response of their tutor who sat in on the final lesson several weeks later. A slight and softly spoken Black-African man, he appeared to physically shrink from my presence and my offer to take part. He was incredibly polite and understood the purpose of the project but insisted that he would rather 'observe' the lesson than play an active role. When I discovered half way through that he had been sat alone towards the back of the class making detailed pencil drawings of cars, I found his withdrawal so awkward that I did not know how to engage with it. The much 'softer' masculinity he embodied did not seem to fit with the hard, muscular environment of the school.

What this illustrates is that before I had even entered a classroom, or met a single pupil, I had been made aware, from a number of different sources, of the kinds of expectations that were attached to the pupils at Moorefield School. The message communicated through the gestures, facial expressions, warnings and public addresses was that 'boys will be boys' and, as a woman going in to this environment, I had better watch my step. Not only were Moorefield pupils carrying the weight of normative male sexuality, but they were also carrying the assumptions attached to working-class masculinity in a deprived, ethnically diverse area of the inner city. Their attendance at a school in an area designated as 'dangerous' meant that they were automatically constituted as a

threat; in this case to white, (female), middle-class society. What was challenging about these assumptions was not just the explicit way in which they were communicated to pupils, but also how they affected teachers' perceptions of pupils' needs in relation to SRE. The senior teacher's warning that the Year 8 boys 'know it all already' reflected the common perception that because boys use sexual and explicit language that they also know what it means.

From this perspective, sex talk constitutes sexual knowledge. Not only did this turn out to be patently wrong (in the way that was so graphically illustrated in the Channel 4 documentary *Mind your F-ing language*[1]), but it was communicated in such a way as to make any contradiction of this assessment very difficult. In literature that routinely emphasises how important it is for young men to be able to 'save face', constructing a situation in which they were assumed to have a particular level of sexual knowledge was particularly divisive (see for example Biddulph 2007; Davidson 1996). As described by Blake (2004), one of the problems with the discussion around boys is that we assume they are a certain way and we talk to them about sexuality in relation to that assumption. What was evident at Moorefield School was that pupils were having to negotiate their masculine identities within a highly restricted discursive frame, in which assumptions about who they were were explicitly spelled out to them at every turn. This raises the question of exactly who is the 'problem' when it comes to boys' behaviour in schools when the opportunities to witness and explore alternative masculinities are so constrained.

The role of pornography
One of the key challenges facing sex education is how to deal with young men's use of, and reference to, pornography. It has been highlighted as an issue in terms of the ways in which pornography is consumed and how it features in boys' communications with teachers and with other pupils. This is an issue that rarely, if ever comes up in relation to girls, despite the fact that there is evidence that a growing number of girls are exposed to pornography on a regular basis. As several commentators have pointed out, while access and exposure to a variety of pornographic material has steadily increased,

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[1] A *Cutting Edge* documentary directed by Claire Lasko and aired on Channel 4 in 2007, it showed how a large number of pupils who frequently used a range of sexual slang words and abusive sexual terms had no idea what those terms meant when asked to explain them.

relatively little academic attention has been directed towards engaging with how young people actually use it (Allen 2006; Hardy 2004; Thomson 1999; Zillman 2000). This 'silence' has not been matched in the mainstream media where boys' access to pornography remains a central topic of interest and debate. Programmes such as *Teens Hooked on Porn*[2] and *Kids on Porn*[3] are some of the programmes on terrestrial television that have focused on the changing patterns of consumption as a result of technological shifts in the way pornography is circulated and produced. *The Sex Education Show,* a prime-time Channel 4 series aired in September 2008 for example, dedicated a section to the exploration of young men's consumption of graphic and 'extreme' pornographic images on the internet site *Youtube*. It illustrated the ease with which they could access and exchange images via the web, the message being that young men access pornography as a matter of routine and what they access far exceeds the assumptions or even the comprehension of their unsuspecting parents. Despite the fact that the young men in this programme described watching such images with their female friends to the presenter, this was presented as an issue for and about young males.

In light of these social and technological shifts, there is a growing consensus in the practice-based literature that boys' consumption of pornography is something that school-based sex education programmes need to address (see Sex Education Forum[4]). As indicated by Blake (2004), this is something that frontline service providers have been aware of for some time in that they deal with young men's concerns relating to the consumption of pornography on a daily basis. But, as Allen (2006) points out, this presents specific problems for schools in terms of exactly how the issue of boys' consumption of pornography should be addressed in the classroom. While boys are identified by research as being interested and indeed 'fascinated' by pornography in a way that girls are not (Hilton 2001), there is evidence that not all boys value pornography either as an educational or a pleasure-seeking tool (Buston and Wight 2006; Hardy 2004) and some actively distance themselves from pornography and its associations with sexual inadequacy (Kehily 2002; Thomson 2000). This suggests that how boys consume pornography, and the meaning they attach to it, are far from

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[2] BBC documentary transmitted in June 2008
[3] Maverick Television documentary for Channel 4, transmitted in November 2003
[4] www.ncb.org.uk/sef

straightforward. In her research into attitudes towards sex education, Allen (2006) illustrated in graphic terms how young men use pornography to engage with the issue of sex education in challenging and provocative ways. Using examples from anonymous questionnaires she shows how male pupils used pornographic narratives to construct responses in defiance of conventional boundaries of acceptability. According to Allen, this is not an issue about consumption but about education. In a similar way to Forrest (2000), Allen takes the disruptive behaviour and sexual bravado of male pupils as the basis for a critique of sex education provision, where the failure to engage with the sexuality of real bodies means that the power of pornographic discourse is inflated (p.77). From this perspective, the behaviour of boys who use pornography to challenge the boundaries of acceptability in schools should not be understood as simply 'impertinent' but as an illustration of the lack of opportunities in schools for young men to inhabit positive and affirming sexual identities. As Allen's analysis indicates, this represents something of a paradox for educators who consider pornography to be both an 'impossible' issue to address in schools and one in need of 'urgent' attention.

In my own experience of conducting sex education in Moorefield School, I found the issue to be a slightly different one. Even though pornography was not overtly addressed as a programme 'topic', its presence in discussions about sex/uality was unavoidable. In the homosocial environment of an all-boys school there was a much less self-conscious approach to pornography from some individuals than I had experienced in all-girls or mixed schools. It was unusual, for example, for girls to reference pornography in their classroom banter although there was no shortage of explicit references to the sexual acts of individuals (this is discussed further in Chapter 7). It tended to have a far more provocative edge in a mixed group where boys were conscious of its 'shock value' as well as its capacity to cast them in a bad light. In the all-male classroom, references to pornography were ubiquitous and frequently passed without note. As described in research, this included examples of explicit questions or comments delivered for their 'shock value' or to get 'a laugh' (Allen 2006). This tended to be when working with a group for the first time where a small number of individuals capitalised on the lack of familiarity to test the extent of my lenience.

But pupils' exposure to pornography was not only made evident in the overt attempts of a small number of pupils to challenge authority. Hardy (2004) suggests that the best

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way to understand the function of pornography for adolescent boys is through Gagnon and Simon's concept of the 'sexual script' (Gagnon and Simon 1973 in Hardy 2004). This is where boys learn about sexual behaviour and contact in terms of a prescribed sequence of action, within a specific sexual scenario. From this perspective, pornography provides the 'script' through which many young men are inducted into the conventions of sexual behaviour with girls/women. What became apparent in the classroom was that pornography also provided a number of boys with a script in the linguistic sense, in that it was used to communicate about sex/uality more generally. I was often asked seemingly straightforward and serious questions in language that was clearly drawn from pornographic discourse and would be considered entirely inappropriate in a school setting. Identifying what could be considered 'impertinent' therefore, was far more complex, where it had to be gleaned not from how the question was phrased but from how it was delivered. One example of this came from a boy in a Year 9 class who, having remained silent up until that point, raised his hand during a discussion to ask me a question. He asked in a muted voice, finding it difficult to maintain eye contact, whether if two men 'bang' a woman at the same time she would die. This was a very odd question given the context in which it was asked and there were a few titters from other pupils around the room. He did not laugh however, but looked around nervously and furtively at this response. I was unsure what to make of his question and conscious of his vulnerability in that moment I asked him to explain a bit further what he meant. Reluctantly and very briefly he described an obscure and very violent scene he had seen in a film and said that he wanted to know whether or not it was true. This was followed by some perhaps more nervous laughter and I was made aware again that asking me this question represented a considerable risk. Not having recorded the session it is difficult to convey quite how awkward and sexually graphic his description was and how much it jarred with the general mode of address and the atmosphere in the room. The question and the sentiment however, were genuine and I had no option other than to respond to his question as accurately and as briefly as I could.

Despite the graphic and inappropriate use of language, I felt in that moment that his question constituted a legitimate query from a clearly concerned and possibly disturbed pupil. My job was to answer it in a way that did not draw too much attention to him while at the same time drawing attention to the issues related to his exposure to what

appeared to be a take on a 'snuff' movie. I found this a very challenging task, not least because the question itself indicated something very tragic; that he had witnessed an 'extreme' form of sexual material that he did not have the emotional resources or competence to make sense of. In that moment, the question of access to pornography was not something that could be easily or adequately addressed as there was no possibility of ascertaining how this young man had come to watch this particular film nor whether this was part of his regular viewing pattern or something he was comfortable with. He appeared very withdrawn in the classroom setting and while I had wanted to address his question as fully as I could, I did not want to draw any more attention to him in the process. The issue in that moment was not one of behaviour or of language, but of moral responsibility. How could I answer a legitimate question from a young man, who had plucked up the courage to ask me in front of his peers, in a way that did not draw attention to him, at the same time as drawing attention to the issues around the fact that he had viewed this material in the first place?

The issue of moral responsibility also came up in an example that arose in a much less charged exchange with a Year 8 class. During a group work session, a very lively pupil who seemed to occupy the position of class joker, interrupted a loud discussion on his table about something they had seen on television, to ask me why it was that you could watch 'so much pornos' in the middle of the day. This question was almost shouted over the din of the classroom and immediately arrested the attention of other pupils. Asking him to explain, he said that he had seen a lot of pornography on cable TV during the day and he did not think it was 'right' that children were able to watch 'that kind of stuff'. The question was, why do adults allow pornography to be on television at times when children – presumably younger than 12 – might be watching. There was a certain sense of incongruity to his comment in that he very much had the physical appearance of a child; small, skinny and pre-pubescent, with a high-pitched and rather infectious laugh. Only moments before he had made a comment about the size of a pair of breasts he had seen on TV that had had other members of the group falling about in hysterical giggles. This much more serious tone was not only a complete switch from this, but it was also expressed with genuine concern. As a confident public speaker, occupying a dominant and very vocal position within the class, he had not thought twice about putting a question to the teacher. In the discussion that followed, during which he remained a central contributor, it was clear that many of the pupils shared feelings and

opinions about pornography that were much more ambivalent. The question of access to pornography was something that many members of the class held strong and very moral opinions about, commonly anchored around the idea that it was 'children' and, by implication, not them, who were the problem when it came to viewing. In this instance it was a boisterous and dominant member of the class who, by revealing his own reservations about pornography had opened up an opportunity for other pupils to question their feelings as well as distance themselves from it.

These two incidents illustrate that boys' contributions to sex education lessons can be graphic, explicit and sexist and may refer to sexual practices that are socially taboo and considered offensive. They also illustrate that not all questions containing sexually explicit language or that refer to pornography are impertinent or intended to shock or offend. While the language in which their comments and questions were couched could appear deliberately provocative in a school environment, this was often to do with the function provided by pornographic discourse as an accessible language of sex. As illustrated in Chapter 4, language constitutes a significant problem in the classroom in that there is often very little common ground between that used by pupils and the 'official' language sanctioned by the school. When the senior teacher instructed the Year 8 class to modify their language in front of their (female) guest, he was referring to the 'inappropriate' use of explicit, sexual terms and the likelihood that I would find them offensive. What is interesting about this assumption, as well as those made by others outside the school, is that it locates the balance of power and knowledge not with a professional in her 30s but with the collective sexual 'script' of a class of 12-year-old boys. When male pupils make graphic and explicit comments there is an expectation that the teacher or adult will be offended. This expectation is validated by the kind of address given by the teacher in his introduction to the Year 8 class. What struck me about some of the less confrontational exchanges was how much these strategies concealed in terms of fragility and vulnerability. As Blake (2004) suggests, there was 'a plethora of assumptions, stereotypes, values and expectations sitting just underneath the surface' (Blake 2004:281). As described by Thomson (1999), both questions illustrated that boys cannot be said to 'choose' pornography, but rather it is something that they encounter as a fact of life (p.181). Having encountered it, they must also make sense of it, something Thomson suggests is a process fraught with struggle and confusion. It is perhaps much easier to get a laugh about the size of surgically-enhanced

breasts than to admit to finding your exposure to sexual material troubling or disturbing. This is especially the case if, as suggested by Hilton (2001), boys expect their feelings not to be taken seriously by adults.

The problem with pornography in this situation was that, without establishing an acceptable language for the classroom, it provided immediate access to a sexual script. For some of the pupils with a limited knowledge of English, pornography seemed to offer them the only script upon which they could draw. It would not have been possible to have the conversation referred to in this chapter if the pupils had not been able to draw on whatever terms they had access to, to make themselves understood. But by using the language of pornography to ask questions about sex/uality they were automatically setting themselves outside of the boundaries of acceptability. For this reason, the content of the discussion may well have been totally unacceptable to teachers whose job it is to police those boundaries. The failure to engage with the language of pornography however, is also a failure to engage with the kinds of ambiguities and anxieties described in these examples. As raised by the young man in Year 8, this is also a failure of to take responsibility for the 'adult' world of sexuality to which young men (and young women) are exposed.

Masculinity and homophobia

The homophobia of male pupils is a well-documented aspect of school life (Epstein 1997; Epstein and Johnson 1998; Kehily and Nayak 1996;1997; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Redman 2000; Sharpe 2002). Sociological and cultural approaches have tended to view homophobia as a kind of performance, a way of policing the boundaries of heterosexual masculinity. According to Epstein (1997), homophobia is one of the ways in which normative masculinities are constituted, where most boys seek to define themselves in opposition to a female/non-macho *Other*. Epstein suggests that homophobia is part of the 'daily misogyny' of boys in schools where the need to appear as 'super-heterosexual, macho studs' can make schools unhappy places for girls, boys who don't conform and their teachers (p.113). Kehily and Nayak (1997) point to the role of humour in homophobic performance, showing how the repetitive rituals of homophobic jokes, banter and gestures are used by dominant 'exhibitionist' males against any males who do not conform. Such performances are seen as part of male struggles over power where working-class boys use homophobia to maintain a position at the top of the

heterosexual masculine hierarchy. Homophobia is thus a 'defensive strategy' as well as a 'discursive performance' (Redman 2000). According to Redman, this kind of routinised, anti-gay harassment is particularly prevalent within secondary schools where male pupil cultures tend to use homophobia in explicit and often vindictive ways (p.489).

Boys' expressions of homophobia and the impact they have on other pupils, have become a key concern for policy makers and practitioners in SRE. In the *Sex and relationships education guidance* (DfES 2000), homophobic bullying was identified as a major cause for concern. In their observations of sex education lessons, Buston and Hart (2001) identified practices such as laughing at gay characters, expressions of revulsion, accusations against teachers, threats of violence and using 'gay' as a general term of abuse as common practices amongst male pupils (p.99). These are illustrations of some of the challenges facing sex educators when addressing sexuality in the classroom which demand that they both engage pupils with the issues around homosexuality at the same time as disciplining homophobic behaviour. According to Buston and Hart (2001), this means that many teachers are reluctant to raise the topic of homosexuality because of the response it engendered.

This was certainly the case at Moorefield School where, from the moment I entered the premises, or even as I was locking up my bike in the school playground beforehand, I was made aware of the ubiquitous and largely automatic use of homophobic comments. As identified by Buston and Hart (2001), many male pupils use the word 'gay' as a general term of abuse, to insinuate that something is bad because it is associated with homosexuality. During the period in which I was working in London secondary schools between 2001-2006 however, 'gay' had become such a frequently used and generalised term as to be disconnected from any association with sexuality at all. To be 'gay', just meant to be dumb, mediocre, try-hard, not as good as something else. A TV programme was 'so gay', as was the detention received for talking in class. When I challenged a group of pupils in Charlesford School about their unquestioning use of 'gay' in this way their response was to laugh, incredulous that I was suggesting they were being homophobic. Even though the discussion that followed was an interesting one about how language was used, they were nonetheless adamant that my claim to finding its use offensive was entirely spurious. Identifying homophobic banter in

Moorefield School was therefore not as simple as it might seem. It was very clearly in evidence, but that is not to say that it was necessarily designed to be homophobic in every instance of its use. Amongst the professional team going in to Moorefield we had been explicit about the need to address homosexuality as part of the programme being delivered. This was not just because it was part of the ethos of the project and its aim to offer an inclusive and wide-ranging programme, but also in response to the heightened awareness of homophobic bullying and the lack of attention to the needs of LGBT pupils at that time. There was an assumption that this would be a problematic issue in Moorefield and that this was all the more reason to address it openly and with consideration for alternative points of view. Having had mixed responses to discussions about homosexuality in schools, I was made aware of the expectation that this was a specific case and that it was likely to be met with resistance and possibly of a very aggressive kind.

The lesson plans reflected the project's aims, where any discussion about sex/uality included homosexuality thereby reducing its stigma as the 'other' identity against which 'normal' sexual relationships were set. My first lesson with the Year 8 class however had been almost entirely dominated by issues that were not part of my lesson plan. Discussing any issues of sex/uality had been difficult in a context where there was very little common language with which to do so. This related both to pupils' lack of knowledge about the body and how it worked and to issues about basic terminology. There were a significant number of pupils with English as an additional and in some cases very new language in the class and it had become very difficult to follow the lesson plan without first clarifying terms with the use of detailed diagrams of male and female anatomy. This may seem incongruous given that the conversation about pornography highlighted above, had also taken place during this lesson. This is an illustration of the kinds of knowledge that are abundant and those that are scarce for pupils with access to a range of sexually explicit material but no formal sex education.

By the end of the first session I was aware that I had not introduced the issue of same-sex relationships and was keen to do so as soon as possible. A discussion about marriage during the first week had illustrated the different religious perspectives within the group and the contrasting feelings about sexual relationships and the sanctity of marriage. The combination of strongly held faith amongst some pupils and the regular

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consumption of heterosexual pornography amongst others had left me a little nervous about introducing homosexuality in this environment. Not because I was worried about challenging their views but because I was anxious to incorporate it in such a way as to avoid making it a challenging issue. This, I felt, was only possible if I could manage the overt displays of homophobia that introducing the topic would inevitably induce.

As part of an activity, pupils were asked to rank various statements about relationships in order of value. They had to decide whether 'trust' was more important than 'a good body' and how 'having sex' compared with 'someone who is rich'. It was not unusual for a Year 8 class to rank the emotional aspects of a relationship over the physical and there had been a great deal of laughter about one boy's insistence that he only wanted a woman that was rich. We had talked about whether their ranking would change as they got older and sensing a moment of opportunity I asked if they thought it would be any different with a partner of the same sex. While delivered casually, I was expecting this shift to alter the dynamic and was already preparing myself for the response. But there was no obvious reaction at all. None that is, other than the pupil who volunteered with a shrug, that he thought 'probably not'. After a further silent pause another pupil looked up and without raising his hand asked, 'miss, is it wrong to be gay?' This was also unanticipated and I was completely taken aback; not so much by the question, but by the silence which followed it and the bank of expectant faces that awaited my answer. The young man who posed the question had made a number of comments during the discussion about pornography and occupied a marginal position within a group of black boys who shared a table. In my fieldwork notes I had recorded my feelings about his thoughtful and well-negotiated responses to the sexual banter of his mates and how subtly he had had to manoeuvre his position of opposition. He was certainly not a dominant male in that sense but, while quiet and considered, his views and approach were respected by his more vocal and conventionally 'macho' peers. In that sense, he could not be considered to be subordinate either. However, the almost automatic inclusion of homophobia and sexism in the exchanges between peers on his table meant that there was a high potential for his question to provoke an unwelcome response. But there was nothing; no comments, no sniggering, just an expectant silence that I was supposed to fill. Stumbling over my words I said something about how it was not 'wrong' to be attracted to someone of the same sex and that lots of people were, but that some people had specific objections to it on religious grounds – and so on. The delivery

was not as I might have planned but my mental preparation had not taken account of the fact that they might actually be interested in what I had to say and able to pursue a discussion about it amongst their peers. Having initiated the discussion, the next 10 or so minutes were taken up with a succession of questions about the practicalities as well as the intimate details of homosexual relationships. The continual interruptions that usually punctuate such discussions never materialised and I tried to maintain the momentum until one slightly obtuse question changed the topic and the moment was gone.

It is clear from my reaction that I had assumed that a group of working-class boys of different ethnic and religious backgrounds could only respond in a certain way to a public discussion of homosexuality. What I had expected was something more along the lines of conventional homophobia with the 'as long as they keep it to themselves' or 'the Bible says it's a sin' response as a best-case scenario. As such I had not considered how to have an in-depth discussion, but how best to manage their reactions in a way that kept the boundaries of the discussion open. This was not the first time I had talked about homosexuality in a classroom, but it was the first time I had delivered this programme in an all-boys school where they had not received any sex education at all. My anxiety had also been fuelled by the reputation of the school and the kind of masculinity it was seen to embody. In my professional mind I was determined to rise to this challenge and had been trying to remain conscious of all the different aspects that I needed to address. Liberal discourses of respect for diversity were significantly complicated by the religious discourses and the cultures of masculinity that were also present. In my efforts to be understanding I had severely misjudged what it was that the group were capable of.

There are a number of ways in which the boys' silence, and the discussion that followed the question, could be interpreted. Aware of the risks, their silence may have been the result of uncertainty, anxiety or even fear, where not wanting to be the one to say the wrong thing it was safer to say nothing at all. Homosexuality may have been so far from their everyday experience that talking about it in the classroom did not, in fact, constitute a risk. As such, their interest was more intellectual, a kind of distant muse on an aspect of adult sexual life. Buston and Hart (2001) suggest that pupils are much more tolerant of the principle of homosexuality than they are of the possibility of their

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peers being gay. Perhaps this exchange was possible because of an underlying assumption that it did not, and could not, apply to them. My own sense was that the silence was one of expectation; that this question from an unassuming but calmly confident young man opened up the possibility of addressing concerns that were normally kept hidden. It was also without precedent and therefore there was no model of how to react to the possibility of having a discussion about homosexuality in the classroom. According to Sharpe (2002), the emerging counter-currents, contradictions and uncertainties in young peoples' reactions to homosexuality may serve to prevent them from taking a simple moral stand. This was particularly evident in the confusion that surfaced in this discussion about how religious beliefs were to sit alongside liberal discourses of diversity and their awareness of gay and lesbian figures in the mainstream media. This brief opening was an example of what might be possible in today's cultural milieu if male pupils, already highly attuned to the discourse of diversity, had the opportunity to explore these issues in greater depth.

I have included this exchange because it illustrates one of the ways in which the assumptions and expectations of adults are translated into practice in the classroom. It also illustrates that even where those expectations are shaped by 'best practice' guidelines and an awareness of discourses around difference and diversity, that they may be out of step with the ways in which these issues feature in the lives of young people. A perhaps more illuminating illustration of this problem lies in an exchange I had in a different school where I was delivering a session on sexually transmitted diseases. Having posed a question to the class about the myths that surround HIV/AIDS, I suddenly realised that none of the pupils recognised the reference to homosexuality. Identifying the confusion in their response I realised that for this generation, HIV/AIDS is constructed much more as a crisis about Africa than an issue relating to gay men. Outside of the literature on sex education in the 1980s and 90s, I had never heard any pupil in London schools actually talk about, or refer to HIV/AIDS as the 'gay disease'. In the schools in which I worked, many of the pupils' families would not have been in the UK during the 1980s and 90s when HIV/AIDS campaigns and the homophobic response to the spread of HIV within the gay community were at their peak. Born in the early 1990s and in many cases, outside of the UK, most of these pupils will have been introduced to the problem of HIV/AIDS through major media campaigns such as those of Comic Relief and Live Aid, which brought the Africa's

HIV/AIDS pandemic to global awareness. The increasing number of pupils of African origin, some of whom will have families affected by HIV/AIDS or have moved to the UK to receive treatment, is also a significant factor in this equation. As such, I had been in danger of introducing an association that did not exist in the popular imagination of the pupils. This was an important reminder of the significance of the cultural and historical context and that the references that permeate the discourses of adults may not accurately reflect those drawn on by young people. The adult obsession with boys' homophobia may equally be out of step with the capacity and indeed the desire of young men to address issues that they face in their everyday lives.

Closed expectations, missed opportunities?

I have chosen to focus on my experience at Moorefield School because of the way in which it both confirmed and challenged some of the key concerns around boys and sex education. Contrary to expectations, it was an experience that I found particularly rewarding and often entertaining and there was much about my engagement with Moorefield pupils to be positive about. I found many of the pupils' responses and comments thoughtful and funny and genuinely engaged. Their attitudes towards, and expectations of, love and intimacy were often unexpected, articulating a strong sense of connection, commitment and respect. In this chapter I have tried to show how particular characteristics and assumptions about the behaviour of young men were attached to the pupils of Moorefield School. As such, these positive feelings may have as much to do with my negative expectations and the reputations of these and many other young men in the wider social field, than with the behaviour itself. According to Allen (2003), young peoples' narratives of sexuality challenge sex education to reframe its message. Many of my experiences with pupils at Moorefield School also challenged sex educators to reassess their expectations of boys as the 'problem'.

But there were also things that I found very troubling, not least the extent to which my own assumptions and approach were shaped by academic discourse as well as media hype and local tales of a problematic masculinity as part of a problematic youth. Of particular concern was the extent to which teachers and adults external to the school were frequently and, it seemed, willingly complicit in a discourse that served to re-enforce certain forms of masculine identity at the same time as denigrating those individuals who attempted to inhabit it. There was a kind of dismissive knowingness

that this was how boys 'are' at the same time as engaging with discourses of equality, diversity and respect which de-valued those identities. According to Nayak and Kehily (2006) the effort expended by teachers and pupils in sustaining a fixed notion of gender identity as 'real and significant' suggests that it occupies a kind of 'comfort zone' for both parties, 'a settled certainty of the educative experience' (p.470). This was particularly evident in relation to sex education at Moorefield School, where there was an unspoken and unchallenged understanding that boys had a precocious knowledge of sex, a natural sexual desire and a lack of interest in their emotional lives. But while the behaviour of both teachers and pupils worked to sustain these assumptions, my experiences at Moorefield emphasised that the two parties do not hold equal responsibility or equal sway for this 'collective dance' (ibid.). My experience in the classroom led me to question exactly whose 'comfort zone' was being prioritised when it came to engaging boys with issues of sex/uality.

The issue of moral responsibility in relation to sex education was raised in this chapter in relation to pornography. In line with recent research of both a popular and academic nature, I have suggested that pornography in its many guises has become an unavoidable feature of young men's consumption of popular culture. While we know relatively little about its function and effects, I have suggested that its presence in school-based cultures of masculinity is ubiquitous. In the example with the Year 8 class, I indicated that pornography was being used as a discursive resource for young men to engage in both positive and negative ways with the sexual domain. As suggested in these examples, this should be seen as an indication of a lack of alternative 'script' rather than an indication that young men automatically endorse it, value it or even understand it (Thomson 2000). From the direct and upfront way in which many of the questions were put to me during the lesson there seemed to be an expectation and a desire for adults, as part of the 'adult' world of which pornography is a product, to be able to address and indeed answer their questions and concerns. As such, they challenged me to engage with their social and cultural worlds, rather than with their behaviour. Where the currency of pornography is heightened by a dynamic of 'control and resistance' (Esptein and Johnson 1998), as in Moorefield School, this is an avenue that many adults choose to close off. But by focusing on the transgressive effects of the language and behaviour, the ambivalence, confusion and in some cases emotional distress experienced by pupils can be lost.

It was clear from my experience at Moorefield School that boys also have specific and pressing concerns about sex/uality that they wish to address in the classroom. Unlike the pupils at Charlesford School whose criticisms were directed against the sex education they were already receiving, the years of disruption and upheaval at Moorefield School meant that pupils did not have the same level of stability or consistency in any area of the curriculum. As such they had nothing to compare their sex education to, and their expectations in this context were undoubtedly already low. This was clearly not helped by the assumption, repeatedly and explicitly spelled out to them by their teachers, that it was their behaviour that was partly responsible for this absence. Boys at Moorefield were expected to be poorly behaved in the same way that Charlesford girls were expected to be 'mature' and it was easy, if not effortless, for some pupils to live up to that expectation and to 'have a laugh' along the way. For Charlesford pupils there were a number of other opportunities within the supportive fabric of the school, in addition to those of the peer group, the extended family and wider culture, for female pupils to access information about sex/uality outside the classroom. What was striking about Moorefield was the paucity of opportunities and the strength of the restrictions both in and outside of the school for pupils to explore alternative aspects of male sexuality. While Moorefield was at a particularly fragile point, this was not only an issue of deprivation or the school's failure to meet government inspection standards, but the restricted framework in which they were expected to develop masculine identities.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have focused on what is concealed behind some of the disruptive behaviour that has dominated the discussion of boys and masculinity in research. As I have indicated, what lies behind this behaviour raises a whole new set of problems and challenges for the delivery of sex education. Not least the fact that boys are encountering a range of sexually explicit material which many adults would be unfamiliar with. From this perspective, the 'problem' with boys is much more related to the failure to engage with the cultural field in which they must forge their sexual identities, than the behaviour enacted as a strategy to manage it. This field includes the expanding global industry of pornography and the increasing visibility of non-heterosexual identities in the media, amongst many others. By focusing on boys'

problematic behaviour there is a danger of missing out on opportunities to have constructive discussions about sex/uality and to overlook the fact that even boisterous and disruptive male pupils have a host of questions, values and concerns simmering just below the surface. As described by Holland et al. (2000), amidst the risk and uncertainty of post-modernity, young people can and do develop strategies for dealing with the complexity and diversity with which they are confronted. That they manage, by and large, to navigate these dilemmas does not detract from the fact that they may also have a significant impact, or at worst do significant damage, to their developing emotional selves. In relation to both pornography and sexual diversity it seems that there is an increasing chasm opening up between the issues teachers are willing to address and the issues pupils must navigate in their daily lives. The question put to me by the Year 8 pupil as to why adults allowed children such easy access to pornography is an indication of the kinds of moral questions that boys are concerned with. These questions pose important challenges to adults about the collective responsibility they hold for the cultural and moral worlds in which boys must grow up. I am not contesting the fact that boys can be and are naughty, and that this can have a significant impact on teachers' ability to conduct SRE. However, as this chapter illustrates, even in the most 'difficult' contexts, both in terms of practical and behavioural challenges, there are still real moments of opportunity to address boys' concerns. If boys are seen exclusively as a problem for SRE, then opportunities for a more meaningful engagement will continue to be missed. As these chapters have also illustrated, to make the most of these opportunities requires that we look beyond surface behaviour and the definition of events presented by pupils themselves. The next chapter builds on these themes.

Chapter 7

'Just messing about'?: Fantasy, fabrication and the significance of play

Introduction

Chapters 5 and 6 confirmed that pupils need and want opportunities to address issues of sex/uality in schools. They also illustrated that this need is often concealed behind behaviour that is difficult and resistant and as such, can make it hard for teachers to make an accurate assessment of the nature of that need. This is particularly the case when needs are themselves confused and contradictory and bound up with the internal and external pressures and demands of adolescence. As a result, they can be, and frequently are, misinterpreted and misunderstood. The final two chapters of this thesis address the question of what happens to these communication practices when the environment is changed. How do pupils engage with issues of sex/uality outside of the teacher/pupil relationship and the problematic dynamics of the SRE classroom? To do so, they move away from the classroom and the formal delivery of SRE to focus on some of the other ways in which issues of sex/uality are addressed and communicated in schools. As described in the introduction, changes in New Labour's education policy since 1999 mean that teachers are not the only adults who talk to pupils about sex/uality in schools and roles such as those of the Learning Mentor, Connexions Advisor and school nurse provide pupils with alternative opportunities to address personal issues. As illustrated in this chapter, these opportunities are often made available in contexts and environments that are very different from the conventional classroom.

The material in the next two chapters is drawn from one of the projects I was involved in during the course of my research. The project, SISTAZ (Someone in School To Ask Zone) was based at Charlesford School and was set up and facilitated by Learning Mentors and a team of pupils. SISTAZ was one of a variety of projects at Charlesford School that were set up by non-teaching staff with responsibility for addressing pupils' 'additional' needs. While SISTAZ focused primarily on non-academic concerns, it was widely cited in school literature and evaluative material as an example of a successful effort by the school to increase pupil participation and to address a variety of social and

emotional needs. Addressing such needs is important for meeting the Every Child Matters objectives and for obtaining status as a Healthy School.

In this chapter, the SISTAZ project is used to examine the ways that pupils use play as a means to communicate about sex/uality. Drawing on data gathered from a one-year ethnographic study of the SISTAZ project – a project in which I was an active participant as well as an observer – the chapter examines how pupils used SISTAZ to engage with issues of sex/uality in playful and sometimes mischievous ways. This focus builds on Chapter 6 in that play, just like 'bad behaviour', is frequently presented as a barrier to effective sex education. Play, or 'messing about', is often seen by teachers (and indeed by pupils themselves), as indicative of not taking a subject seriously, as something that undermines or detracts from the 'real' issues. Alternatively, play is understood from within disciplines such as psychology and psychoanalysis as an important means for communicating feelings. Humour and jokes, for example, are understood not as the opposite of real activity, but a disguise or 'camouflage' for sentiments which are socially taboo (Billig 2001; Freud 1976). Humour and jokes are understood to play an important role for adolescents, in communicating their anxieties about aspects of 'adult sexuality' (Chapman 1980; Ransohoff 1975). From these perspectives, play provides a means to communicate things that cannot otherwise be expressed.

This chapter approaches play in different terms. Rather than categorising pupils' playful communication as either reliable or unreliable, real or fictitious, play is understood as an opportunity for pupils to test boundaries, to explore possibilities and to act out fantasies. I approach play not as something that tells us about students' lives in a literal sense, but instead as an indicator of their field of reference. In other words, play is a practice that is revealing of the cultural resources and reference points that pupils draw on when communicating about sex/uality. Using specific examples from the weekly SISTAZ sessions, this chapter examines play in terms of what it facilitates in an educational context, and for what 'messing about' allows us to see that other forms of communication may not. I argue that play serves crucial functions for young people's sexual learning, including by providing a 'safe' opportunity for exploration. Rather than dismissing play as incidental or inconsequential, I argue that it should be considered as

a legitimate and significant form of communication that has much to tell us about young people's developing moral/sexual worlds.

This chapter is based on a detailed analysis of play-related examples from the archives of the SISTAZ project. SISTAZ was designed to offer pupils an anonymous forum in which pupils in the school could get information and advice about any issue they were concerned about. One of the founding principles of the project was that pupils could ask *anything*, and – provided their questions did not go against the SISTAZ 'code of conduct'[1] – could expect their question to be answered. Questions were submitted on paper slips through the 'Problem Box', located in the school library. Once a week, a group of trained peer mentors would open the box, sift through its contents and compose typed answers to the questions. The questions and answers were then placed in a locked display cabinet – the 'Problem Board' – in the school playground. After four years, the project's archive books contained over 500 displayed problems - testament to the commitment and hard work of the groups, as well as to the popularity of the service.

But there were also approximately 2000 entries that did not receive responses. One of the reasons for this was that up to fifty entries a week were received during peak periods in the year – way beyond the capacity of a small team in a 45 minute lunch break. It was not just the number of entries that was problematic, but also the nature of some of those entries. There were a large number of slips that the girls considered to be 'fake'. Recognising patterns in the tone or language of the entries, it was often easy for mentors to identify the slips that were motivated by something other than the desire to receive confidential advice. Often these slips would contain expletives, malicious comments or material that was so outlandish it could only be a joke. These, pupils would claim dismissively, were pupils 'just messing about'. But there were also entries whose motivation was more ambiguous, that were suggestive of a playful engagement with truth, even if this truth was not necessarily a literal one. These were entries in which the truth was being played *with*. In those cases it was difficult for the group to make a distinction between truth, fantasy and fabrication. How these playful attempts to

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[1] The main principles of the SISTAZ code of conduct were: all opinions are to be listened to and individuals treated with respect - even if you disagree; to maintain the confidentiality of all pupils accessing the service and of the SISTAZ sessions; to remove the use of expletives/real names or references to real people; any issues involving real people, or concerns about particular individuals are to be discussed with a learning mentor in private.

engage with the service are to be understood, and the functions that they serve, is the subject of this chapter.

The Problem Box: Different kinds of play

The following discussion is built around five examples from the SISTAZ project archives. These examples have been selected to illustrate some of the different playful ways in which pupils engaged with the service. The five examples do not include any slips where the language or grammar was unclear, or slips that contained only expletives - of which there were many. Excluding these kinds of example from my analysis is not for issues of propriety but because they raise a different set of issues – including sometimes of practical comprehension - to those I wish to discuss here. As the basis for this chapter, I have selected five legible examples of different ways in which sexual themes were used to engage with the SISTAZ project, all of which can be interpreted as examples of 'play'. Each of the entries is examined in terms of content and tone and the kinds of discursive and cultural resources that are drawn on for its construction. The difference between this analysis and the discourse analysis carried out on magazine problem page entries (for example Currie 1999; 2001, Jackson 2005a; 2005b, McRobbie 1996) is that these entries are also discussed in relation to the editing process. This is because how pupils responded to the playful engagement of their peers was very different from how I, as an adult, interpreted their content. This offers an important window into the different ways in which pupils engage with issues of sex/uality when the content is decided by pupils and not adults.

Figure 1: Parody of the problem page genre
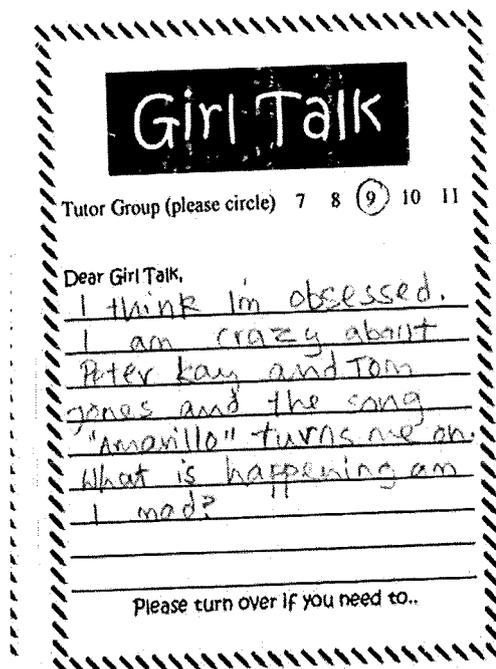
I think I'm obsessed. I am crazy about Peter Kay and the song "Amarillo" turns me on. What is happening am I mad?

In Figure 1, it is the content and form of the entry that make it clear to the reader that the author is playing a practical joke. The individuals (Peter Kay and Tom Jones) and the song ("Amarillo") are both pastiches of the classic pop artist/song and the antithesis of a conventional teenage sex symbol. The idea that such figures could be a 'turn on' is clearly ironic, emphasised by the final question 'am I mad?' This entry uses a wry sense of humour to gently poke fun at the service but not in any obviously malicious way. Unlike those examples that contain roughly scrawled expletives, the content of this entry and the neat and legible way in which it is written suggest that the author has given it some thought.

In this entry the author effectively encapsulates the feeling of a conventional problem page entry. This entry could be seen as an example of what Fine (1983) refers to as 'conflict humour', where parody or caricature are used to signal a separation between the author and an 'undesirable' or 'deviant' out-group. By choosing particular cultural references the author was able to indicate clearly to the reader that these were *not* her

concerns. By mocking the genre in this way they are also able to signal that, unlike those who write in to magazine problem pages, they are above the trivial and frivolous concerns of the typical teenage girl. Conscious of the problem page format and of the teenage subjects they produce, this entry suggests a knowingness on the part of the author where humour is used to signal their superiority. Like the participants in Buckingham & Bragg (2004), McRobbie (1996), and Currie's (2001) research, the playful use of cultural references is used to communicate that they are not uncritical of the media they consume.

The SISTAZ student team generally considered entries of this kind to be a welcome break from some of the more serious issues. While the references in Figure 1 meant that it was dismissible as a 'fake' however, the mockery contained within some of these entries was not always so easy to shrug off. As Harold (2004) points out, a prank or practical joke, has a rhetorical power to confuse and provoke. While seeming funny and trivial, it can also pose a direct challenge to 'verbal and behavioural *routines*' (Vale & Juno cited in Harold 2006 p.208). The content in Figure 1 is humorous in its incongruity, but it also pokes fun at the sincerity and compassion of the service they were providing. Some of the pupils in the group, who took their position in SISTAZ very seriously, often found it difficult to understand why individuals would choose to poke fun at them in that way.

In entries like Figure 1, play is used to communicate a message about the author. In entries such as Figures 2 and 3 below, the anonymity of the Problem Box service is used to engage in different way. Both examples are taken from entries that were answered and displayed on the playground board. They represent one of the most common features of the playful entries to the Problem Box – the sexual scandal.

Figures 2 and 3: Scandal and melodrama

> Dear Girl Talk,
> I'm pregnant and I forget who is the father, my mum
> will kill me I can't abort it no money, please girl talk
> help me. My dad will kill me he doesn't know I will die
> if I have it oh my gosh!

> Dear Girl Talk,
> I just lost my virginity to a boy, but he doesn't want to out
> with me anymore because I slept with a girl and now I think
> I'm pregnant. What should I do? Please help.
> Year 7

As with Figure 1, both of these entries are conscious of the Problem Page format but they engage with the genre in a very different way. Drawing on problem page conventions, they document a catalogue of scandalous acts and their anticipated consequences. Both these scenarios are delivered in a sensationalised tone that uses language and references for dramatic effect. They both refer to a suspected pregnancy, further heightened in Figure 2 by the 'forgetting' who the father is, and in Figure 3 by claiming to be in 'year 7' (age 11-12). These acts are carefully embellished with additional information which suggests angry and possibly violent parents, abandoned boyfriends and a lesbian affair.

As with Figure 1, the content and tone of these entries is used to signal to the reader that the entry is playful rather than serious. But unlike the mockery contained in Figure 1, this kind of entry operated much more along the lines of a game, and one where everyone understood the rules. Despite the improbability of these entries they were invariably well received by the group. They were what made their role as agony aunts exciting. Drawing on the work of Bateson (1972), the references within these more scandalous entries seemed to act as signals to the readers that "this is play". Bateson understands play as a form of 'meta-communication' where meaning is transferred through signals between parties. According to Bateson, the majority of these signals are implicit and rely on respondents recognising them as signals and not as direct indications of actual events. The game that seemed to be being played in this case, was

one of 'desperate teenager' and 'knowing agony aunt', where the familiar content of teenage magazines and television chat-shows provided the framework and material for each role. Unlike the parody identified in Figure 1, they were interpreted not as an act of hostility but as an invitation to play along. Whether the main issue or the specific details were all true, partly true or completely false in such cases, was somehow not the point. It was the form that was being authenticated, and in the name of 'playing the game' their authenticity was rarely challenged.

The example used in Figure 4 presented something a little more difficult to the group.

Figure 4: Complex play
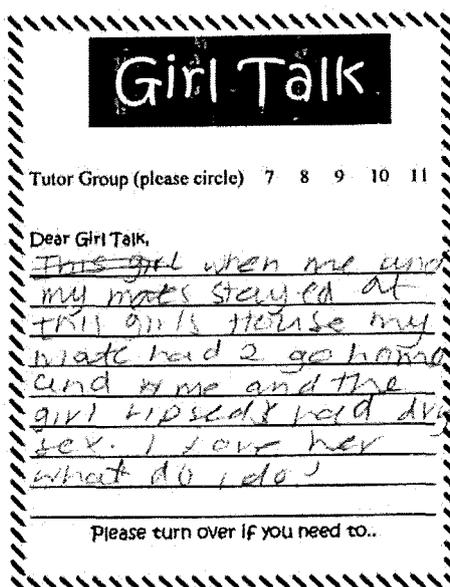
When me and my mate stayed at this girl's house my mate had to go home and me and the girl lipsed and had dry sex. I love her what do I do?

Without the overt use of problem page conventions, or conspicuous clues in the content, it is not immediately obvious whether this is a 'fake' problem or not. The entry describes a casual sexual encounter between two 'mates' which has resulted in strong feelings of 'love'. It is not delivered in a scandalous tone and unlike the previous

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examples, there is no problem or disaster the author would like them to solve. If it is a joke, then it is certainly not funny, but neither does it appear to offer the reader an invitation to play.

This kind of entry was challenging for the group for two reasons: firstly, because not knowing whether you are being played *with* is intrinsically uncomfortable; and secondly, because the material used in many of the entries was itself, challenging. This example could be understood as a form of what Bateson describes as "complex play" where the central message is constructed not around the premise "this is play", but about the question "is this play?" According to Back (1990) much of the tension in early and late adolescent play is centred around this issue; of whether practices 'mean what they stand for' (p.10). The 'duelling play' that Back (1990) describes amongst young participants at a youth centre, revolved around the uncertainty of meaning attached to verbal and physical exchanges. As Back illustrates, the forms of meta-communication which organised play could easily break down where imaginary lines were crossed and playful exchanges were transformed into open confrontation. Here, misinterpretation could be dismissed through the phrase 'only joking' but not before feelings of anger, frustration and humiliation were expressed by the recipients. This draws attention to the precariousness of play and the risks as well as the pleasures it presented for its players. In a similar way to that described by Back, misunderstanding the meanings contained in the entries to the Problem Box also carried certain consequences. As the signs and signals were textual, rather than verbal or physical, this was not the threat of open confrontation but of a particular kind of exposure.

While there were a large number of entries which described lesbian desire/sexual encounters, crushes on female friends or teachers, these were generally framed as moments of crises that needed addressing. In Figure 4, a lesbian encounter is presented not as part of another long list of misdemeanours (as was common in the sexual scandal), but as incidental and unproblematic. As such, the reader is being asked to consider both the norms of heterosexuality and of female friendship. In circumstances where entries made the group feel uncomfortable, it was easier to dismiss the entry as 'just messing about'. There was, after all, no way of knowing whether the circumstances described reflected an actual event, an elaboration on an event, or a complete fantasy. One way to avoid getting this wrong and possibly being made to look

stupid was not to answer them at all. The guiding principles of the project however, (that all entries were to be treated *as if* they were true, or could contain some element of truth), meant that in practice, entries like Figure 4 were discussed and the group tasked with coming up with an answer. Unlike the previous examples, this would often take them outside of their comfort zone, involving the discussion of more contentious issues which could not so easily rely on conventional cultural forms for their reply. These less 'cosy and familiar' issues were difficult because they did not have a 'script' in the way that heterosexual promiscuity and suspected pregnancy clearly did.

Whatever the motivation, this kind of entry could be unsettling for its readers because it plays with the boundaries of female sexuality and forces the reader to confront the fragility of the heterosexual norm. The discomfort experienced by several members of the group illustrated that while very familiar with the concept and discourse of sexual diversity they were still uncomfortable with the practical reality of homosexuality within the peer group.

Figure 5 – Testing boundaries
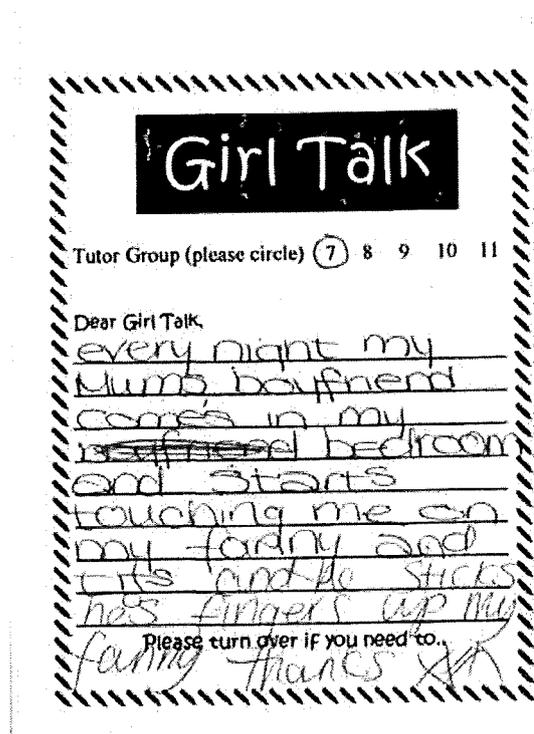
Every night my mum's boyfriend comes in my bedroom and starts touching me on my fanny and tits and sticks his fingers up my fanny. Thanks xxx

Figure 5 describes a situation of ongoing sexual abuse. There is no ambiguity about what is being depicted, or who is involved. The details are presented in a fairly graphic way and are not embellished with a list of other scandalous acts, or accompanied by a token cry for help. But while it was not uncommon to receive entries that described sexual abuse, and it is widely acknowledged that sexual abuse in the family is under-reported, the details presented in this entry do not have the character of a disclosure. The description is graphic, but it is also salacious and trivialised. The details squeezed on to the bottom of the slip for example, are cut short by a polite and familiar 'thanks xxx' before the purpose of the slip is reached. These kinds of clues suggest that it is the *idea* of sexual abuse being presented in this entry, rather than an actual act. An idea which, despite or perhaps because of its gravity, was a common theme in the more playful entries to the Problem Box.

It was interesting to note that pupils seemed to be very aware of sexual abuse and were un-phased by allegations of this kind. They appeared to be comfortable discussing such allegations and rarely dismissed entries simply because they referred to it. In this context, talking about sexual abuse seemed unremarkable, so much so, that they would often talk about it as if it were an unexceptional part of family life. As with the promiscuity and suspected pregnancies of the sexual scandal, inappropriate touching, rape, and incest, all had a familiar script upon which they could draw. They were well aware that the numerous allegations about abusive fathers were unlikely to *all* be true, but this was troubling more on account of being caught out by 'joke' entries than because of what their content implied. Far from being a topic too remote or too adult for their comprehension, it seemed to be part of their understanding and everyday knowledge of the sexual domain.

'Just messing about'? Sex/uality and the functions of play
These five examples have been selected to give an indication of the different kinds of play that were evident in the entries to the Problem Box. These are all entries that I have selected on the basis of patterns identified in my reading of the slips over a number of years. One of the ways to approach playful entries of this kind is to try to ascertain

whether or not they were true. As described in relation to these examples, this was of vital importance to the pupils responsible for answering them. For them, the issue of truth was important because it dictated whether or not they needed to respond to the slip, but also to what extent they were being made the object of fun. Ascertaining its status was about determining whether they, or the service were being played *with*.

But as I have described, members of the group also took up entries that they knew were 'fake' because it was deemed to be worthwhile or interesting. In the case of the sexual scandal for example, answering the slip meant that they were also able to enter into a discussion about its content. Pupils were willing to consider a slip *as if* it were true if it meant that they could talk about particular subjects.

So how might we usefully understand the relationship between these slips and the lives of the young women who wrote them? One argument made about play is that it is inextricably tied to the substance of everyday life. According to Sutton-Smith (1997), '[t]he logic of play is the logic of dealing with emotions such as anger, approval, or fear, and ... how these may be expressed and reacted to in any mundane or fantastic way that the players choose.' (Sutton-Smith 1997:157). In play, the substance of everyday life is both mimicked and mocked, with mundane experiences realistically played out alongside 'ludicrous distortion, exaggeration, and extravagance at times bordering on the bizarre' (Fein 1987:291). If the 'playful', as Sutton-Smith describes, is determined and shaped by the set rules and expectations it aims to disrupt, then even 'ludicrous distortion' is only a distortion of the reality it mirrors and attempts to reframe. One way to look at the situations described in Problem Box is to see all entries as related in some way to the substance of the everyday lives of these female pupils. While no conclusions can be drawn about which aspect of their lives the content reflects, they do tell us something about the *field of reference* from which these pupils draw. In play the experiences described exist not as truths but as possibilities, interwoven with aspects of everyday life both real, hyper-real and imaginary. Seeing the basic logic of play as an elaboration on the experiences and emotions of everyday life, the Problem Box contained a wealth of information about the parameters within which those lives are lived.

As described in relation to these examples, the service and the kinds of play it prompted had important functions for the members of the SISTAZ team as well as for those accessing the service. The level of interest among the SISTAZ team related not just to its plausibility but also to the kinds of issues being raised and the ways in which play was used to raise them. The anonymity of the Problem Box provided an opportunity to 'mess about' and it is interesting to think about how and why this opportunity was so fully exploited. This raises the question of the function of this kind of play. This is discussed in the following section in relation to three possibilities; as a 'safe' space and opportunity for exploration; for the testing and challenging of wider boundaries; and for engaging in collective fun.

Safe space and opportunity for exploration

As described in relation to Figures 2 and 3, members of SISTAZ were keen to discuss the more scandalous entries to the Problem Box even where they were aware that they were unlikely to be true. Unlike the more complex messages concealed in parody or examples of 'complex play', these less hostile exchanges allowed both the author and the group to approach serious issues in a light-hearted way. While exaggerated, the situations were at least plausible and opened up opportunities to discuss different aspects of their lives in a variety of ways. These discussions were often very animated as they would talk around 'real' cases in or outside school and their real-life implications.

An explanation offered by psychology for the function of humour is that it allows us to communicate things that cannot otherwise be expressed. As the work of Dundes (1987), Ransohoff (1975), Chapman (1980), Fine (1983), Sanford (1984) all reveal, for adolescents, this largely revolves around anxieties about physical and sexual development. In Ransohoff's (1975) study of adolescent girls, she shows how humour and jokes allowed anxieties about menstruation and issues of 'adult sexuality' to be brought under control. The displacement of anxiety on to the 'other' through mocking and play allowed sensitive and difficult subjects to be raised without 'danger of punishment or loss of love' (p.156). Only when 'overwhelming words' could be reduced to manageable ones and 'frightening' things to 'cozy and familiar ones', could pleasure, relief and humour be expressed (ibid. p.161). One way to read these entries is that the playful tone of the sexual scandal allowed 'frightening' aspects of female sexual

transgression to be brought under control. The spectre of a suspected teenage pregnancy and the heavy social price it carries for young women for example, can be addressed without the anxiety that accompanies these discussions in the public domain.

In the case of Figure 4, the group were less keen to engage with its content, uncertain about the motivations of its author. In deliberately writing in an ambiguous way the author may have wished to test the commitment of the group to deal with *any* issue. Presenting something highly controversial in a normalised way, enabled the author to 'pull one over' the group and gain a sense of superiority and pleasure from that achievement (Harold 2004). Even though the author was not there to witness it, there was evidence that such entries were motivated by a desire to create feelings of vulnerability or humiliation in its readers, testing their capacity to approach sexual issues that were more transgressive. In order to tackle issues they did not necessarily feel confident with, members of the group also needed to feel as if they were in a 'safe' space.

It is important to stress however that the motivation for writing this and other entries may not necessarily have been hostile. The anonymity of the service also presented an opportunity to share thoughts or fantasies about sex without any of the accompanying social consequences. One of the functions of fantasy according to Sutton-Smith (1997), is to provide individuals with a forum to express elements of their own life in more emotionally vivid and exciting ways. In play, the experiences of everyday life are temporarily transformed, 'transcending its usual limits' (p.159). Describing a sexual fantasy which was both thrilling and pleasurable, may be one way of vivifying a probably much more mundane everyday reality. As such, the ambiguity of play is used as a 'safe' space in which to explore aspects of sexuality and to experiment with its possibilities.

Testing boundaries
What Figure 5 illustrates is that for many pupils, the anonymity of the service presented an ideal opportunity to break sexual taboos and to 'say the unsayable' (Billig 2001). In some cases, this opportunity was graphically exploited and the pleasure derived from the subversive act of putting certain words in writing - knowing that they were then going to be read by the group and possibly even appear in public - was palpable. This

even reached competitive heights, with some seeing just how far they could go and what they could get on display. As described by Back (1990), this could be understood as a kind of 'wind-up' where the boundaries of sexual possibility were being used to test the resolve of the group. The function of play in these entries was that at any point their content could be rendered meaningless; they were 'only joking', 'just messing about'. This exit point hovered permanently on the margins as a get-out-clause after which no meaning or inference could be made to stick. This meant that pupils were free to 'play' with subjects like sexual abuse without incurring the suspicion or disapproval that would inevitably have been attached to similar attempts in the classroom.

From an outside perspective, Figure 5 is unsettling because it takes one of the most pernicious sexual taboos and plays around with its meaning. While this could be dismissed as inappropriate and in bad taste, this type of game-playing is about more than just a capacity for bad behaviour. It also reveals something about the boundaries being tested. The significance of obscene sexual humour according to Fine (1976), is that in 'describing behaviour considered sexually improper (and thus comical), it reveals by implication the correct forms of sexual interaction' (p.140). Humour is thus able to signify that certain behaviours are acceptable and others are taboo, without ever directly saying so (ibid.). While this entry is not exactly 'funny', by crossing the boundaries of acceptability it also brings them in to sharp relief. By engaging with child abuse in a way that is both trivial and salacious Figure 5 engages with child sexual abuse from the unspeakable position of sexual pleasure. In doing so it subverts the adult discourse of risk and harm in which young people - and girls in particular - are positioned as victims of adult male sexual aggression.

Drawing on Freud, Billig (2001) suggests that one of the functions of humour is that it allows the expression of sentiments which are less socially acceptable. According to Freud (1973), the purpose of jokes is that they allow us to draw pleasure from instincts such as hostility, aggression and sexual desire, which must normally be kept hidden. From a Freudian perspective, joking is not the opposite of real activity but a disguise or 'camouflage' for feelings which are socially taboo (Billig 2001). In this way, playing with subjects like sexual abuse can also be interpreted as a 'camouflage' for feelings which cannot be expressed. In the case of Figure 5, these could be related to 'unspeakable' feelings of sexual attraction and desire, or sexual fantasies of being

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desired, which have no acceptable social framework in which to be articulated. Psychoanalytic concept such as that of Oedipal crisis, suggests that there are other ways in which these entries can be interpreted which probe at the hidden and unconscious meanings they may contain.

Collective fun

One reading of these entries is that, as pupils concocted outrageous entries or strained to read the new postings to the Problem Board they were engaging in a collective form of fun. Through the medium of the Problem Box service the de-sexualised arena of the school was temporarily transformed into an open arena of sexual scandal and transgression. As illustrated in Figures 1-3, this included playful entries which poked fun at the service and the problem page genre it represented, as well as playing with sexual themes to interact with the service in a less hostile way. It was common knowledge within SISTAZ that entries themselves were often the result of the collective effort of pairs, or even groups of pupils who would collude in the construction and content of their 'problem'. As such they were also engaged in a collective process of meaning making where particular sexual themes were negotiated and selected on the basis of their weight or value in this forum. In relation to Figure 1 it is possible to see how pupils used the forum in their own self-production. In this example, middle class forms of wit and satire were used to signal an 'absence of naivety and the assumption of sophistication' (McRobbie 1996:175) thereby distancing themselves from certain pupils and the kinds of femininity they embodied. By engaging in this kind of collective fun, pupils were also marking out the boundaries of difference, reemphasing group identities.

One of the most striking features of the entries was the way in which the service was used to engage in sexual fantasy and to explore forbidden sexual territory. The examples used in this chapter illustrate that this could involve both a subtle testing of boundaries as well as more daring transgressions. According to Sutton-Smith (1997), younger children's stories often portray a world of 'great flux, anarchy and disaster' and as such are often avoided or strongly modified in the more 'rational' environment of the school. Many of the entries to the problem box included a fantastical element, where characters and situations were exaggerated to the point of the bizarre and the ridiculous. These entries would no doubt have been dismissed as 'inappropriate' or 'immature' in

the classroom but were a significant way in which pupils engaged with the project. In this way, the anonymous forum of the Problem Box service allowed pupils to address issues of sex/uality in ways that were not permitted in other public forums in the school. As described in Chapter 5, there are few opportunities for female pupils to engage in any form of adolescent play, where mischievous or playful behaviour around sex/uality is interpreted as 'immature'. The frequency of these entries indicates that young people need the opportunity to engage in this way and that the the service provided an important outlet for this kind of behaviour.

In the final section of this chapter I would like to consider the gendered nature of these forms of play and their function within the group.

Gender and play

There are a number of ways in which the entries to the Problem Box can be seen as tied to school-based cultures of femininity. Unsurprisingly, the content of the entries almost exclusively reflected concerns with the female body and its corporeal experiences. The subjects chosen to parody the genre, formulate a sexual scandal or transgress boundaries were in most cases a reflection of those subjects which dominate concerns about female sexuality more generally. According to Allen (2005) these are not simply preoccupations with the biological body. Anxieties about teenage pregnancy, sexual abuse and STIs, reflect the kinds of concerns that the female body is 'disciplined' to have (p.36). This was illustrated in the way that specific topics were used to signal a 'crisis' in the life of the author – such as a suspected pregnancy, sexual desire for another female - or where particular combinations of events were drawn on to signal to the reader that they were 'messing about'.

The second applies to the way in which the entries and the answers were crafted. In some cases, the ability of female pupils to handle and manipulate the problem page format reflected a grasp of the genre that it would be unlikely to find amongst all-male groups. While evidence from online 'agony aunts' suggests that these services are very widely consumed by young men[2], other studies indicate that the magazine format is

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[2] Statistics taken from a paper delivered by Aidan McFarlane at the Trust for the Study of Adolescence Conference October 2006 indicated that 39% of the 650 emails per month requesting advice from the Teenage Health Freak website, came from young men.

primarily consumed by and very popular with young women (Buckingham and Bragg; Currie 2001: Jackson 2005; Kehily 2002). In her analysis of a sex education lesson, Kehily (2002) illustrates that the collective consumption of magazines amongst young women can put them at an advantage when it comes to discussing issues of sex/uality in the classroom. This is described by Epstein and Johnson as giving young women a greater 'sexual literacy'. This was evident in the consistency with which the entries conformed to as well as actively and effectively transgressed the problem page genre. According to Currie (2001), and McRobbie (1996), magazines also encourage and construct a particular kind of female reader, assumed to be detached, knowledgeable and self-reflexive. Many of the entries to the problem box played on this kind of subject by parodying the self-reflexivity of the concerned female subject. The ability to engage with the problem page format in the way outlined in this chapter can be seen as a reflection not just of gendered patterns of cultural consumption, but of the more 'knowing' and 'sexually savvy' female consumer in post-modernity (Currie 2001, McRobbie 1996).

But there were also ways in which the entries to the Problem Box were unconventional and perhaps also surprising. One of those was that much of the material that came through the problem box was vulgar, crude and unsophisticated in the way normally associated with boys. The poorly spelt, excessive use of expletives and exaggerated description of graphic sexual acts, were every bit as 'immature' and provocative as those documented in all-male groups. One of the points to draw from this project is that girls are also capable of using sexuality in playful and explicit ways and derive great pleasure from doing so. In a similar way to that described by Allen (2006), the anonymity of the Problem Box was used by a number of pupils to exert agency through acts of defiance. This included descriptions of sexual bravado, deviance or promiscuity, where the desire to 'shock' their reader were aimed not just at the de-sexualised arena of the school, but wider forces which devalue and delimit female sexuality. These entries challenge the notion that such forms of play are 'inextricably tied to masculinity' (Allen 2006).

Conclusion
In this chapter I have focused on one aspect of a well-established and successful project run by Learning Mentors at Charlesford School. Using five examples I have illustrated

some of the playful ways in which many pupils chose to engage with the SISTAZ project. Drawing on different theories of play I have explored possible interpretations of the message contained within these examples and illustrated how they were interpreted and negotiated by members of the group. In doing so I have also attempted to probe at their meaning and to offer possible explanations as to why pupils might chose to engage with the project in this way. By focusing on play within an all-female peer group I have aimed to contribute to an understanding of how young women use sex/uality for the purposes of humour and fun. Using five original examples from the project I have shown why 'messing about' should be considered significant in two crucial respects; as a significant way in which young women communicate about sexuality; and for what it allows us to see that other forms of communication do not. I have argued that such activities should not be treated as empty provocations but neither should they be considered to offer a 'truth' about young people's lives. As the examples have shown, playful and humorous communications have a precarious and unknowable relationship to actual events - but this should not be taken to mean that they have no relationship at all. By seeing play not in terms of reality or fantasy but in terms of possibility I have argued that it acts as an important window into young peoples' developing moral/sexual worlds. By focusing on alternative forums such as that provided by the SISTAZ project it is possible to get an insight into the very different ways in which pupils approach issues of sex/uality outside the classroom.

Chapter 8

'Doing' Competence: performing the sexually knowing subject

Introduction

In Chapter 7, I looked at examples of pupils' playful engagement with issues of sex/uality. Drawing on material from the SISTAZ project, I illustrated why it can be difficult to interpret pupils' needs from their communication with each other. The question of what status should be given to young peoples' accounts of their sexual subjectivities is continued in this final chapter, through examination of a different context in which pupils engaged with issues of sex/uality. Moving away from the day to day running of the project, this chapter focuses on the evaluative interviews and focus group that involving project members towards the end of the academic year. Drawing on my knowledge of the group from the weekly sessions, this chapter examines the stark contrast between their behaviour in those sessions and in the more formal setting of the recorded interview. Their very different behaviour in the research context is understood as a form of 'identity-work' (Allen 2005), where pupils use the interview context to exhibit and develop an 'authoritative' voice. By focusing on what is revealed and concealed in this performance it asks what kind of sexually knowing subject is performed when individuals consider themselves to be 'on show'? This chapter explores how these contrasting selves are to be interpreted and challenges the notion that 'giving voice' to young people in this way produces accounts that are 'empowered'. Instead, it suggests that we interpret these accounts as examples of sexual identities 'in-process' (Redman 2000), where performing in the research context is one of the ways in which young people develop sexual identities that are coherent. Alongside the examples of play in Chapter 7, it is argued that forums such as the SISTAZ project provide vital avenues within schools for pupils to explore different aspects of sexual learning in the development of their sex-gender identities.

Contrasting behaviour

In Chapter 7, I showed that pupils who were part of the SISTAZ project often had to confront material and behaviour that was challenging. Responding to entries in the Problem Box required that pupils discuss and debate a wide range of issues, many of

which related to the sexual behaviour, feelings and experiences (real and imaginary) of their peers. During these discussions, pupils would share their disgust, discomfort, excitement or indifference to the content of the entries and – depending on the time of year, what had happened that morning or in the previous week's session the previous week – would show varying degrees of enthusiasm, empathy and patience for this task. What most characterised these sessions was the lively nature of this process. Emptying the Problem Box never failed to capture the attention of the group, if only long enough to read through the entries and share in the collective assessment that followed. This was part of the fun of being in SISTAZ, but it was also a key site for exploring and learning about aspects of sex/uality that pupils were interested in.

The decision to conduct interviews and focus groups with members of the SISTAZ team was motivated by the desire to offer them the opportunity to share their experiences and give their own perspectives on the project. As with the other projects I was involved in at Charlesford School, I wanted to give pupils the chance to 'have their say'. I hoped that the interviews would act as a forum in which to extend the kinds of conversations that took place during the weekly sessions, incorporating both their anxieties and uncertainties – and their growing confidence. What actually occurred contained neither the familiarity of that relationship, nor the variety of responses and perspectives it permitted. Instead, I witnessed something very different, something which contradicted not only my knowledge of the individual pupils but my expectations and hopes about what the research context would yield. In both the individual and the group interviews, what I witnessed were carefully managed and well-executed performances. In contrast to the interviews discussed in Chapter 5, the girls were being interviewed about a project in which they had made huge investments and of which they felt they had ownership. They made an implicit assumption that this would be different from our usual conversations and that they were being, in some sense, judged on their conduct. Unlike the more familiar environment of the weekly sessions which allowed them some freedom to discuss, disagree and learn about the material, the interview context was perceived as one in which they were expected to demonstrate their achieved knowledge and ability. As I turned on the record button, an internal switch was flicked and the whole basis of the interaction shifted. What I witnessed was not unfamiliar; these were the same mannerisms, the same tone of voice and vocabulary I had seen 'switched on' for visitors to the project, or to address external audiences. What was disconcerting for

me, but entirely comprehensible to them, was that they now enacted these same roles in my presence, to my face, and with no sense of irony. I became acutely aware that while I was the visual audience, it was not me they were talking to as they recounted things that I had also witnessed, and avoided topics that we had discussed at great length. In wondering how to make sense of these meticulously crafted enactments, I was also aware of quite how much they invested in them, and how important it was that they were taken seriously. This was made clear to me in the few attempts I made to try to restore what I thought was a more honest familiarity between us during the interviews. These were politely rebuffed or ignored. I had got it wrong, overstepped the mark; in Simmel's words I had 'come too close' (Simmel 1950 cited in Goffman 1959:76). I realised now that my role was to cooperate, to help them out by maintaining the 'social distance' necessary for their performances to be successful (Goffman p.75). I certainly did not want to embarrass them, and, realising that I had misjudged the situation, I learnt to keep my distance.

The contrast and, in some cases, the contradiction between their different behaviours in these two contexts presented a problem to me as the researcher, in terms of the status I was to attribute to these very different accounts. According to Allen (2005b), focus groups not only provide insight into what young people think about sexuality, but also act as a public forum for the presentation of self (p.86). In the focus group, Allen suggests, young people often take up subject positions which promote a particular version of their identity. Allen describes this presentation as a form of 'identity-work', where individuals fashion particular kinds of sexual identities through what is revealed and concealed about their sexual selves. 'Identity-work', according to Allen, is both unconscious and deliberate: young people draw automatically on the discursive resources they have available, but they do so in such a way as to consciously promote a particular version of their gendered identities. Using Willig, Allen suggests that the 'active and purposive' uptake of subject positions implies a 'level of self awareness not always present in general talk' (Willig, cited in Allen 2005a:87). This suggests that the way pupils' perform in a focus group is a direct reflection of what they think the research context requires.

According to Allen, this performance is also shaped by the kinds of resources on which research subjects are able to draw. This is described in terms of their social location,

where the ability to perform certain identities is dependent upon their access to cultural resources. Allen points to the significance of being in a relationship (or in a supportive environment) in which issues of sex/uality are addressed for providing young people with alternative ways of conceptualising themselves as sexual subjects. As described in Chapter 7, the SISTAZ project provided pupils with a forum in which to discuss issues of sex/uality outside of the classroom. While it was a pupil-led forum, it was facilitated by Learning Mentors who played an important part in shaping these discussions and providing information. This input gave pupils access to the kinds of discursive resources, particularly those connected to therapeutic and youth work, which shaped the practice of Learning Mentors. As such, the SISTAZ project gave them access to a particular kinds of discursive space.

It is useful to think about pupils' contrasting performances in the SISTAZ interviews as an example of 'identity-work'. From this perspective, their very different performances can be understood as an 'active and purposive' take up of particular subject positions in order to meet what they considered to be, the demands of the research context. From this perspective, the questions for this chapter are what kind of subject was being performed in the interview, and what resources did the participants draw on in the process? The argument made in this chapter is that being 'on show' in this way placed particular demands on the pupils to present themselves as both sexually knowledgeable and morally respectable. For this to be effective, they drew on a variety of discourses from popular culture, education and the family/community in ways that were both conventional and creative.

'Doing' competence in the research context
In Chapter 2, I described the context in which the focus group with the SISTAZ team took place. I showed how the pupils manipulated my request for them to take part in the research so that it included a day trip to my University. I also illustrated through a description of their behaviour both before and after the recorded session how much this contrasted with their behaviour during the focus group. I pointed out that despite being familiar with me and the issues, they interpreted the research context as a formal occasion in which they were required to address an external 'public' audience, represented by the recording device. Their exceptional formality in this instance could be put down to the unfamiliar environment of the University, if it were not that these

same voices were also present in the individual interviews they took part in. These took place in The Lounge, the informal space in the school in which the weekly sessions were carried out. The key elements in both the individual interviews and the focus group that defined this public identity are outlined in the following section.

The 'reflexive voice'

The interviews and the focus group all opened with a general question about what they had learnt from being part of SISTAZ. All of the interviewees responded by saying what they had learnt about themselves, independently identifying the ways in which being part of the project had affected their sense of self and allowed them to improve on, or identify, areas of weakness. This was done by referring to their thoughts and feelings about their role in the project and how this had impacted on their own emotional development. This is captured by Naomi, who, taking her role in SISTAZ very seriously, offered a long and detailed response. Here Naomi shows how improving her confidence was an important step in becoming a more responsible, caring individual:

> Naomi: Well I think it's helped me and helped others as well. I found it really fun, not just fun but interesting and good to learn. I found out like, more skills to help people and to become, I think I know this might not have actually helped, but it's helped me to become more confident in some ways, to be like..., to give more. Because before, when people used to come and ask me for advice I used to say 'go to someone else', or 'go to a teacher'. But now I feel more confident to actually say to them, you should do this you should do that. But I would say to them, that is in my opinion, and make sure they won't think that is the right thing, but that's just in my opinion. And it's helped me to help other people and I think it's helped me to understand other peoples' problems and not just mine as well.
> (F:White/African-Caribbean, Year 8, Interview)

In contrast to her bubbly and often impulsive persona during the sessions, here Naomi is a picture of calm and composure. Carefully listening and responding to each question, hands folded in her lap, she describes her growing confidence in her ability to be a good member of SISTAZ. This is framed as a result of her increasing awareness of her own competencies and the ability to reflect on her mistakes.

Shakiah, regarded by both pupils and teachers as a model student, was also keen to position herself as having made some emotional progress as a result of the experience:

> Shakiah: I learnt how to answer problems more, and better because if I was to answer a question first I would just give a straight answer not thinking about the buts and ifs, but then when I came here I learnt how to do it. I also learnt how to work more cooperatively in a group because I normally like to take control [smiles]. But I realised that you have to work in a group when you're in SISTAZ because everyone has to have it shared out nicely not just taking control all the time. (F:African-Carribean, Year 8, Interview)

As someone used to being looked up to, Shakiah's recognition that she likes 'to take control' but has learnt to adapt to a group environment is a significant admission. Unlike Naomi, Shakiah did not originally feel a lack of confidence about her ability to answer questions and so was unable to signal this as a sign of personal development. Shakiah came from a middle class background and her mother was a teacher. This was evident in the way that, as part of her confident manner amongst her peers, Shakiah would sometimes slip into an almost teacherly role with them. As someone who was also very popular and respected, she was aware that other pupils sometimes found this annoying, and being able to identify a weakness in this approach is seen as a positive step.

Seyi, on the other hand, was not so confident that she had achieved this goal. While very talkative during the sessions Seyi was not confident about her own abilities and would freely admit when she did not understand something, or felt out of her depth. In her interview her personal development was recounted as something still in progress:

> PH: And were you surprised about any of the problems?
> Seyi: Yeah! I was surprised about like the ones where they're having like, sexual intercourse 'cause I'm a bit immature. But I think the SISTAZ erm experience made me more mature, 'cause every time I would giggle but now I don't. (F: African, Year 8, Interview)

The frustration and bewilderment Seyi often expressed during the sessions is replaced here by a more composed reflection on the fact that she has made some progress. As with Naomi, being able to recognise and recount her own emotional development into a 'more mature' individual is a source of pride.

In all three examples, the teenage subject being presented is one who is able to reflect on her emotional progress from a position of greater self-knowledge and self-awareness. In their idealised roles they are keen to signal that they are competent not only in their ability to meet the demands of the project, but also in their ability to articulate knowledge about their thoughts, feelings and behaviour. By using this more reflective voice they were able to communicate to the observer that they are independent, responsible and in control.

Respectable knowledge

Significant for all the girls was the desire to present themselves as knowledgeable, not just about their own lives, but about the lives of their peers, and, in particular, to cultivate the impression of having exclusive access to teenage sexual exploits which were inaccessible or incomprehensible to adults. This was often articulated in response to questions about the project, but in most cases they referred not to pupils in the school but 'the kids' or 'people our age'. As Currie (2001) suggests, the shift from first to third person in young peoples' narratives can often indicate uncertainty, signalling instability and an 'undoing' of the coherent subject (ibid. p.276). But the third person narrative was also consciously used to construct a particular kind of subject, with a particular kind of sexual knowledge. As the extracts reveal, using the third person allowed them to talk authoritatively about the behaviour of their peers without referring to their own personal experience. Having certain kinds of sexual knowledge, particularly in-depth knowledge about the sexual activities of their peers, could therefore be made respectable.

The following extract shows how Shakiah draws on her confidence in public speaking to construct an authoritative position on young people's illicit behaviour. By adopting a particular linguistic style she communicates both the extent of her knowledge and her personal distance from the activities she describes. Here she is talking about some of the influences on young peoples' behaviour:

> Shakiah: Um, also I think, going back to the subject of maturity, even though people may start to think it's... people know about it from Year 10, it seems like it's um, things that kids are doing nowadays start from even when they're in Year 7. Because kids are starting

to start smoking because they think they're in secondary school, so by the influence of their friends, *and* also their hormones they start getting interested in things. So, say, they all start smoking [or] something, taking drugs and drinking, or because of their hormones they're starting to get a bit happy, excited and so if they see something they want to go into more detail and see what it's about. And so then by the time that they do grow up, they are like some kind of crazy machine ready to go out and experience things, not knowing how to actually control themselves because they experience things for the first time. (F: African-Carribean, Year 8, Focus Group)

Through the deliberate use of carefully selected words and phrases Shakiah makes it clear that she is breaking down the material for her adult audience. By using phrases such as 'to get a bit happy, excited' in place of whatever vernacular phrase would describe the sexually charged state she is alluding to, she presents a picture which is both censored and sanitised. Shakiah is also careful to position herself as someone who is very much in control and signals to her audience that she understands the behaviour of her peers from an adult perspective. She not only knows what is going on, but also its significance in the eyes of the adults she is addressing.

Shakiah's position as the model pupil, meant that she was often pushed by both pupils and teachers to take up the role of responsible and authoritative student. In the research context Shakiah was keen to maintain this dual role and was careful not to display any signs of weakness. Appealing to adult sensibilities while remaining faithful to the peer group was also a precarious position, as she had to be careful not to over-identify with any particular side. As illustrated in the last extract, this sometimes had the odd effect of producing an account in which she failed to fit successfully into either category.

Shakiah's desire to control the flow of information between these two worlds is shown plainly in the following conversation taken from an individual interview. The extract comes from a discussion about talking to parents about relationships:

PH: *Thinking about relationships, do you think there are any things that are really different now for you lot, from say, when your mum was at school or...*
Shakiah: [laughs] Yeah! A lot different, 'cause when my mum was at school my mum was, you wasn't really allowed to talk to boys, she was allowed to talk to boys but there was a more strict like, the boys were on this side the girls on this side. Now it's boys and girls are mixed all over and that people [adults] don't realise that even um, now people are

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not going out with someone but they're 'linking' with someone, meaning they can say they like someone and start talking to them in a kind of more intimate way, more than a friend, but then they can have more than one person that they're doing that with, which then could cause a bit of confusion because there is more than one person going out with one person. And then... [pause]

PH: So are you saying that 'linking'... we didn't say linking when I was at school we said 'dealing' and I think it meant the same thing, but are you saying that linking is something that didn't used to happen in that way in which you...

Shakiah: [interrupts] *As* often I don't think. 'cause I think it still did happen because I think that could... that does happen, but I don't think it happens as often because practically every person here, well I don't...but, well a lot of people in the school have 'links' or, as we call it, so they will be going, doing this and doing this which will then... It kind of reflects more on teenage pregnancies because I know that there's been a high rise between the time of say a couple of years ago to now with teenage pregnancies because of all the things that's going on.

My attempt to show complicity and to broach the subject from a position of understanding, is taken by Shakiah as a challenge to her position. She wanted to appeal to me as a sympathetic adult but not the extent that we could be seen to share the same position in relation to her peers. This was unintended, but I immediately registered it as a signal that I had over-stepped the mark. In Goffman's words this qualifies as a kind of 'ritual contamination' of the performer, where the '[f]ailure to regulate the information acquired by the audience involves possible disruption of the projected definition of the situation' (ibid. p.74). Shakiah's performance relied on having an exclusive claim to certain kinds of knowledge about the sexual activities of her peers. The possibility that I might share that knowledge or even that I might hold additional knowledge, acted as a threat to the definition of the situation she was working hard to sustain.

It is clear from both extracts that knowledge is very much distanced from experience. Her role as the knower, informing me (and the outside world) about what young people are like, is done from a position of authority, but one which is held in terms of her proximity to that activity, not her participation in it. She definitely does *not* have 'links' even though 'practically every person' there does, thereby clarifying her separation from the behaviour she critiques. Instead, she aligns herself with the more adult world by showing her ability to consider the practices of her peers in a wider social context.

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Shakiah draws on her available cultural resources, such as her knowledge of the debate about teenage pregnancy, as a way to signal her understanding of the negative aspects of young people's sexual behaviour from an adult perspective. This also serve to signal her credentials as someone who makes rational decisions on the basis of the scientific information available to her.

In one sense, this is the exemplary 'ideal' teenager, knowledgeable, competent and self-regulating. But Shakiah's desire to align herself with her adult audience was unusual in its alacrity and was unmatched within the group. Shakiah was on many accounts an exceptional student. She was amongst an elite of ethnically diverse, high achieving pupils in the school, but she was also one of the few middle class pupils who did not come from a white, liberal background. Her family were of West Indian heritage and she was part of an extended family within a Christian community in the local area. She was confident in her ability, but she was also sensitive to the situation of pupils around her, and drew on cultural resources from within her family and community, which aligned her with a diverse group of students. This accorded her a particular status within the peer group, but it also required a huge amount of effort to maintain. As illustrated in these extracts, it left very little room for uncertainty or doubt, exemplified in the research context where Shakiah was acutely aware of the 'public' nature of the account she was giving.

Much more common was the position taken by Seyi in which she presents herself as part of the group she describes but very much separate from its activities. For Seyi, parents just 'don't get it' and young people must make the most of this predicament by helping each other. This is Seyi's response to a similar question about talking to parents:

> Seyi: I think children find it hard to speak to their parents about things because sometimes yeah, their parents like, they don't really get it. Because I think like there's more things going on in school than there was then, there's like, more problems and people are like wondering about stuff and asking more questions so if you would go to your parents and ask them a question they might be surprised about your question so if you want to go and ask someone like your age it'll be much easier because they understand 'cause they go to the school they understand like what's going on.

As with Shakiah's description the picture is appropriately censored and details of the activities, the 'stuff' they are experiencing, are concealed from her audience. But Seyi is less concerned with aligning herself with the adult perspective, instead positioning herself as someone who understands and even shares the difficulties 'children' face in trying to communicate about their private lives. For her, there is still an element of confusion and anxiety about what she should know at this stage and who are the reliable sources of information. While she clearly distances herself from the behaviour, she still positions herself as someone who is not fully 'in the know'.

Illustrated by the first two extracts, and common to all the interviews, was the distinctly marked difference between being sexually knowledgeable and being sexually experienced. Being a knowledgeable teenage subject meant having knowledge *of* the world around them, not knowledge *from* that world. As West (1999) points out, young people are very aware of the social disapproval of youthful sexuality and of the risks involved in bringing it in to conversation with adults (p.539). Being able to talk about teenage sexual behaviour at the same time as distancing themselves from it, allowed them to appear both competent about sexual matters and beyond moral reproach.

The moral subject
One of the ways in which the separation between sexual knowledge and sexual activity was achieved was through the adoption of highly moralistic and conservative perspectives on sexual behaviour. These moral positions often mirrored typically adult concerns about young peoples' judgement and ability to make the 'right' choice. As highlighted in Holland et al. (2000), young people will often adopt an adult subject position when describing moral development, as the only subject position available within the main developmental model. This model sees the child as 'in process' towards an achieved end of adult moral standing (p.278). With no moral subject position of their own on which to draw, young people often resort to describing the activities of their peers from the perspective of adults (ibid.). This occurred frequently in the interviews where it was always *other* young people who were positioned as lacking in moral judgement and in need of adult guidance. It was also evident in the fact that the sexual behaviour of their peers was conceptualised within the discourse of risk and harm, where engaging in sexual activity was linked to negative outcomes. According to Holland et al., adopting a distinct moral position is more prevalent

amongst younger adolescents and young women. As Year-8 pupils (aged 12-13) they were well aware of the stigma attached to sexual activity amongst this age group, and particularly of adult concerns about the behaviour of female pupils. Adopting a distinctly moral stance was one way of articulating their experiences without drawing attention to their own position.

In the following extracts both Ceren and Naomi adopt adult subject positions to talk about the behaviour of their peers.

> Ceren: Some people, girls and boys, they kind of tend to um, think that as they get, like when they're 13 or 12-13, they think that they're really mature enough and they can do what they like so they end up not listening to their parents and elders, so they just end up doing their own thing so then that leads them into trouble. (F: Turkish, Year 8, Focus Group)

> Naomi: I was going to say, like sometimes as you said like sex um, people do it like while they don't know, because as like a lot of schools in...kids in schools they smoke and stuff and then they might take drugs as well and even after school and stuff and even sometimes they don't know what they're doing after they've taken like the drugs, so a lot of times people or um, um, what do you call it, people force, not force you but they provoke you and friends tell you to take drugs and stuff and you don't know what you're doing, especially if you are with other like, like, like different sex like boys and girls don't know what you're doing then, you like have sex and sometimes you're not always like meant to be doing it but you just accidentally do it and stuff. (F: White/African-Carribean, Year 8, Focus Group)

In both cases young people's behaviour is seen as a response to their particular stage of moral development where they are positioned as morally incompetent and emotionally ill-equipped to make the 'right' decisions. From Ceren's perspective, risky behaviour is related to a breakdown in communication between adults and children. She draws on the traditional values of her community which emphasise respect for your 'elders' and the teachings of your culture. For Naomi, the root lies more in the complex nature of peer relationships and peer pressure. In both cases young people are conceptualised as moral 'learners' rather than moral 'agents' (Holland et al. 2000), reflecting an adult perspective on young people's moral development. This is used to signal the lack of moral maturation in their peers and to claim a level of moral maturity for themselves.

In a rather different way Shola reflects on why it is that young people are such poor decision makers when it comes to sex:

> Shola: … mainly at our age yeah, we're starting to understand things about the laws of nature, the way things go, and we're starting to realise the consequences, but still, we're still influenced by the people around us, the atmosphere and the things we do, our friends. All the stuff like smoking, you see your friends and you think it's cool, but in the long run you will end up killing yourself and things. But still, it just like, people do stuff, just to think, make people think to make them popular and just people to respect them for it, but in the long run they may hate doing it, but they still want that popularity, and people to actually notice them. But that notice, they won't notice you, respect you, in the way you wanted in the first place. But it could go badly wrong, but still, no matter what you do, no matter what you tell them they still, people our age are still going to be doing what they're doing, even though the law says yeah. What the laws… they still don't listen. (F: African, Year 10, Focus Group)

As with Naomi, Shola presents the moral development of her peers as very much, 'in process'. She emphasises that young people do not listen to advice or follow the law, being guided only by a desire for popularity. While positioning herself within this group she is able to distinguish herself from the behaviour by pointing out how and where they have gone wrong. In the sessions, Shola's somewhat conservative and conventional approach set her apart from the more savvy and streetwise attitude of the other Year 10s. Shola was a relatively recent immigrant from rural Nigeria, and her more traditional values along with her evident naivety, were quietly tolerated by her peers. What was interesting about Shola's account was, that while she occupied a relatively subordinate position amongst her peers, the research context allowed her to establish a position of authority over the Year 8 pupils by virtue of her age. In that sense, the focus group provided Shola with a platform for a presentation of self that she was otherwise much less able to access.

There was one aspect to their moral positions which did not fit so easily with the adult model. This concerned their relationship to their religious beliefs. Shakiah, Seyi and Ceren all reflected on their own religious beliefs when commenting on sexuality, an issue that came up frequently in the anonymous postings in the problem box. In all three cases, the moral guidance offered by their faith was presented in a way which was entirely compatible with liberal perspectives on sexuality:

Shakiah: Well I don't – because of my religion – I don't think being gay is the right thing, it's not that I've got anything against people being gay it's just...

PH: What is your religion?

Shakiah: Christian

PH: What kind?

Shakiah: Pentecostal. So I don't think its, it's nothing against the people I just don't think it's...I just don't agree with what they do. And so, but if it's not me who is actually in that situation it's other people, to be able to see that it's them that is making this decision and see that there is other people around to help them in their way, not to... Just because I've got one certain view that I have to go and say it directly to them because it's not my life it's theirs. So to help them in the best way I can instead of just saying that I'm not going to, [or say] 'I think you shouldn't do this' and just write it down in the answer to a problem, actually say that you *could* do this, you could do this and to actually think about what could be the best for people.

Shakiah sees no contradiction between her own religious views and her ability to be understanding and accepting of other peoples' sexuality. In one sense, this is unsurprising, as the view that sexual difference is not just to be tolerated but to be acknowledged and respected was central to the ethos of the project. They were fully aware of my own views on the subject and may have interpreted this as an appropriate authoritative position in the context of the interview. But we had never discussed their own religious views in the weekly sessions and this was the first time any of them had offered their position on sexuality from the perspective of their faith. In no other circumstances during my research had I come across Afro-Caribbean and African pupils of Christian faith talking about sexuality in this way. While religious difference is managed and negotiated – not to mention internally policed by the girls themselves – on a daily basis in a school where all the major religions are represented, the doctrine of respect and understanding is rarely extended to sexuality. This is not just true of pupils' attitudes but also of schools themselves (Epstein 1998; Rassmussen 2006). In this sense it represented not so much an adult moral position, but more the adaptation of a particular liberal model to other areas of their lives. In 'doing' competence in this way, they were able to incorporate the conspicuous liberal discourse without compromising their faith.

These examples show how the girls adopted adult subject positions when it came to young people's behaviour and moral development. As with government-incited media rhetoric, illicit sexual behaviour was seen as wrong and out of control and the inevitable consequence of a lack of boundaries and guidance. While this could be a response to the absence of alternative moral positions, as suggested by Holland et al., the example of faith and their handling of sexuality suggest that some of them were also capable of adapting certain positions to suit their own lives, or at least of talking about them in those terms. This capacity for accommodating dominant discourses on sexuality which stood in contradiction to their own beliefs suggests that performance is about more than the passive uptake of existing discourses. In adapting those discourses they were also creating new possibilities, spaces in which – at least discursively – liberal and conservative religious views could co-exist.

It is important to point out, that the sophistication of some of these performances was exceptional and far from universally accessible. One pupil in particular, Jasmine, who remained very quiet during the focus group and declined to be interviewed, struggled to present a subject who conformed in this way. Her 'switch' in the research context was no less obvious, but it was not to the competent subject exhibited by the other girls. Lacking the skills and the confidence to take up this role, Jasmine opted for silence during much of the focus group, and was reluctant to be drawn in to the conversation or to talk about herself. She was not outwardly confrontational or disruptive, but her inability or unwillingness to be 'on show' in this way was awkward for the group. The following example illustrates how difficult Jasmine found it to participate at their level. In it I address her directly in an attempt to draw her in to the end of the discussion. Shola, the other Year-10 pupil, had just given a detailed answer about the tensions between parents and children when it comes to safety:

> PH: And Jasmine, are they right to worry because of the things that teenagers are actually doing?
> Jasmine: Yeah.
> [pause]
> PH: Would you be happy for your mum to know everything that you and your friends do?
> Jasmine: No! [laughter from the others]
> PH: Do you think she would be more worried if she did know?
> Jasmine: Yeah

PH: And do you think she would be right to be worried?
Jasmine: Yeah

My attempt to make it easier for Jasmine by asking her questions about herself instantly back-fired and the situation had to be quickly rescued by a more general theme, but not before the awkwardness of our interaction had been felt by the rest of the group. Despite their many attempts to cover up Jasmine's monosyllabic responses by laughing in appropriate places and jumping in with their own answers, there was a tension here that could not be named. Previous resentment over her lack of commitment to the day-to-day tasks of running the project could not be entirely eliminated, although every attempt was made to conceal this during the focus group. From my knowledge of Jasmine, I knew that her lack of engagement was not simply due to a lack of will. She had opted to be part of the team on this occasion and was fully aware of what the trip would entail. What became apparent in this context was that the polished coherence of the other girls' performances made her own efforts seem completely pointless. For Jasmine, 'doing' competence in this way was not something she could just switch on and, as with many pupils, performing at that level was simply out of her reach. Her efforts to 'pass' acted as a threat to the rest of the group and, rather than risk their embarrassment and resentment, she retreated into silence.

Naming sex
As may be apparent from the extracts used so far, in the focus group and the individual interviews all the girls were vague, evasive or silent when it came to naming sex. Even though, as a group, we had had numerous and graphic conversations over the course of the year about different aspects of sexual activity and feelings (as the material in the previous chapter illustrates), a veil of uncertainty and embarrassment would pass over any discussion of sexual matters during the interviews. While knowledgeable, competent and moral subjects were effectively 'performed' in the ways already described, addressing the specifics of sexual behaviour in their new role presented a problem. Uncertain as to what a knowledgeable competent subject might actually 'know' about sex, or how they might be expected to talk about it, the girls found themselves resorting to a number of different strategies in an 'attempt to pass' (Goffman 1959). The occasions where these attempts failed, where contradictory or alternative

feelings and perspectives 'leaked' (Currie 2001) into the interview, made the fragile and make-shift nature of their performances more apparent.

Overcoming the anxieties presented by having to talk about sex were partly achieved by a considered use of language. Technical terms such as 'intercourse', for example, were used to convey their formal approach to the interview context, with vague vernacular phrases such as 'doing stuff', or 'the things they do', used to gloss over or sideline the more explicit details of the situations they described. Within this restricted field they were able to limit the opportunities for embarrassment while still giving the impression of being knowledgeable and competent. But it also left them with very little to play with, and on more than one occasion, as shown here by Seyi, individuals found themselves – quite literally – lost for words:

> Seyi: you know in school yeah, they teach us about um, ...[pause as Seyi looks around nervously].
> [someone else says 'sex' very quietly]
> Seyi: yeah that...
> Ceren: You can say it you know! [embarrassed laughter from the others]
> Seyi: [ignores this and carries on] They um, they don't put it in exact as much detail so then, when you want to know...
> *PH: At your age you mean?*
> Seyi: Yeah, when they teach you about it in science yeah, when you want to know more about it then you end up looking for some more information about it and sometimes that has to do with it as well.

In this uncertain pause, Seyi lets slip that she was unsure how to approach this situation and looks to the group for assistance. Her difficulty in broaching the subject was not entirely compatible with the adult, mature front they aimed to present and it was this lapse, rather than the word itself, that was embarrassing for the group. In betraying her anxiety about referring to sex, Seyi may well have revealed something that they were all feeling, but the success of the performance depended on such feelings being kept hidden. By stepping in, Ceren was able to cover over any gaps opened up in the performance by Seyi's uncomfortable pause. This example of leakage illustrates that even using the word 'sex' in a public performance represented an unknown for Seyi, and her anxiety about what her own knowledge might signify could not be concealed.

That Ceren's reaction was part of the cooperation necessary to 'save the show', rather than an expression of her own confidence with the subject, is evident in Ceren's very different approach in her individual interview. Her admonition that of course Seyi 'can say' *sex* is contradicted by her shy and awkward handling of the same issue some weeks later. Here she is responding to a question about the sexual content of the problem box:

> *PH: And you were surprised that those were the things that people in the school might be doing or might be thinking?*
> Ceren: Yeah. I've seen some like, not really, like some weird ones on the board but I didn't expect it to be this weird when I was first starting [laughs]. So it was kind of strange.
> *PH: But when you say 'weird' what do you mean?*
> Ceren: You know, 'cause sometimes they're like...[laughs with embarrassment] ...they're really... they are talking about their love life and stuff, and they were talking about it really like... *describing* everything and stuff, so that's what I mean.

It is evident from her reaction that Ceren finds this question embarrassing and is uncertain about how to respond. She does not use the fact that we are both familiar with those details as a resource to draw on in this sticky situation, preferring instead to skim over the details and terminate her response. The content of the slips and the responses of the group are shielded from her imagined audience as sordid details that are not to be disclosed. By distancing the material in this way, Ceren is able not only to maintain an impression of respectability, but also to avoid any possibility of being pressed further. Speaking openly about such matters in this public forum is clearly a source of shame for Ceren, despite being able to talk in a mature and thoughtful way about the same subjects during the sessions.

They did not all struggle quite so obviously to find the right words, but even where sexual terms were used with relative ease they often appeared out of place. Terms such as 'sexual intercourse' helped to consolidate the formality of the situation but this formality was also awkward and limiting when it came to telling their own stories. Naomi's slightly more candid description of coming across an internet porn site helps to reveal the difficulties in communicating an everyday situation in this restricted field:

Naomi: Like, 'cause once my sister was on MSN and I was with her and then um,
something just popped up and then everything, and there was these people and every time
you clicked them they did some rude stuff and you could see different stuff of their bodies
and stuff and you could see them having intercourse and then stuff how people that they
say, sometimes they do rude things like, 'have it, have it' and um.... I don't think people
like, understand the consequences and teenagers are just like excited or they just don't
know about the stuff and they just think like, what's the big deal if you have it? And so I
think they just, like, do it.

Struggling to capture this experience with the language available, and unsure about quite how much to reveal, Naomi moves quickly from a personal tale to a third person narrative on the effects of pornography. Having stepped on to new territory Naomi quickly retreats to the more familiar terrain where pornography is bad and sex is harmful to children. As described by Currie (2001) above, Naomi's switch to the third person is a clear indication of her own uncertainty in the telling of this story. This could reflect an anxiety about the experience itself and what it might reveal about her, or her lack of resources for telling the story appropriately in this context. Either way, the story itself is problematic because it requires describing and naming sex. Rather than run the risk of getting this wrong in front of her adult audience, the story is abandoned for safer, more familiar ground.

In the role of interviewee, talking about sex seemed to leave them relatively few resources upon which they could draw. Linguistic devices such as adopting technical language, or avoiding any explicit references, allowed the group to gloss over the more uncomfortable details, but it was a precarious position to take up in terms of fostering an impression of knowledge and competence. The content of the problem box and their role in the SISTAZ project seemed to be incompatible with the idealised version of the sexually knowing subject they wished to present. The formal, sanitised version that was offered, allowed them to overcome that contradiction to some extent, but it also severely limited their capacity to communicate in any depth about their experiences. In the role of interviewee, it was more important to signal a competent subject, in command of her teenage world, than to display any anxieties or incoherence that world might present. For research, this can mean missing out on the opportunity to engage with that complexity.

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Through a detailed analysis of interview and focus group material I have shown that the members of the SISTAZ team interpreted the research context as a formal space that required a particular performance of self. It was implicitly understood by the pupils to be a public forum – symbolised by the digital recorder – in which they understood themselves to be 'on-show'. In order to meet the demands of this context they adopted an authoritative voice about their role in the SISTAZ project and the sexual behaviour of their peers. This was done by demonstrating their knowledge of teenage sexual behaviour in a way that concealed any areas of uncertainty or confusion. This knowledge was presented as knowledge of the world around them, not knowledge gained from personal experience. Thus they were able to maintain a position of authority without incurring moral judgement, thereby making their knowledge 'respectable'. This distance was also achieved by adopting an adult moral position in which sexual behaviour was understood to be risky and a sign of the incomplete nature of adolescent moral development. They drew on therapeutic discourses which privilege self-awareness to signal their competence in areas of emotional learning and their capacity for empathy and understanding. In doing so they indicated that they were equipped with the right resources to make the correct judgements about their own lives. As shown in the final section, this performance of competence unravelled when it came to naming sex. With no public language of sex on which they could draw, their uncertainty was unwittingly 'leaked' into the interview. This threatened to reveal the fragile nature of their performance and the identity they sought to present.

As also indicated in this discussion, not all pupils were able to 'do' competence to the same degree. The success of performances such as Shakiah's were dependent on her access to a variety of discursive constructions, including middle-class discourses of rationality. For pupils like Shola, they relied much more on traditional perspectives on teenage behaviour and drew on the therapeutic discourses which shaped the SISTAZ project. For Shola, her experience as a committed member of SISTAZ project had also provided her with the confidence to present an authoritative voice in a way that was not normally available to her within her peer group. In the case of Jasmine, her more sporadic and problematic engagement with the project meant that she was unable to draw on it as a resource in the same way. Jasmine's silence during the focus group was interpreted as a response to her awareness of her inability to compete in this way.

As also illustrated in this section, this was not simply a repetition of those discourses but a creative adaptation of dominant discourses to suit their own lives. As such they were able to combine a liberal discourse of tolerance for sexual diversity with their own religious discourses. In doing so they were able to signal their competence as actors in a flexible, diverse, modern world.

Undoing competence

My initial surprise and disappointment at encountering these performances in the research context was due to the failure of the interviews to capture the complexities and vibrancy of the weekly sessions. I had hoped that, by speaking to them in a familiar forum about their experiences, I would be able to document how they grappled with the kind of material identified in Chapter 7. Had I not been so preoccupied by this contrast, I would undoubtedly have been impressed by the confidence and articulacy of these young women. Being 'on-show' in this way, produces a very convenient voice for the adult researcher and it is easy to see why it could be understood to indicate their 'empowerment' My knowledge of pupils in other contexts however, made me suspicious of this interpretation, aware of the complexities and more uncomfortable realities of their sexual knowledge that it concealed.

So how are we to understand these contrasting performances? At the start of this chapter I suggested that they could be understood as a form of 'identity-work' (Allen 2005a), where participants actively and purposively take up subject positions to meet the demands of the interview context. From a Butlerian perspective, in 'doing' competence in this way, they were also 'becoming', constituting their identities through particular gendered performances (Butler 1991; 1993). From this perspective, their behaviour during the interview tells us something about the kinds of identities that can 'exist' for young women, and the boundaries of what is 'culturally intelligible' (1993:22).

According to West (1999), how young people talk about sex needs to be understood as regulated not just by the conventions of gender by also of age. West argues that the contemporary compulsion to speak about sex, and the rules which govern what can be said, operate within a very different frameworks for young people and for adults. The awareness, on the part of these particular young people, of the need for their knowledge

to be respectable, for example, did not indicate a concern about feminine respectability but a recognition of the prohibition on youthful sexuality by adult society. From this perspective, theirs was a highly regulated public voice, constrained by the recognition of the boundaries proscribed and policed by adults. 'Doing' competence in that way looks more like a bid for adult approval: the performance of an aspect of their identity that was recognised and valued in the eyes of adults.

This speaks to Harris' (2005) concern about the political project of giving 'voice' to young women. Listening to and allowing young women to speak can, she indicates, also be oppressive and regulatory where it has become 'tangled up with social forces that appropriate, commodify, punish, delimit and depoliticise their sexual expressions' (p.41). This suggests that the idea that research provides a context in which young women can speak outside of these constraints is naïve. From this perspective, the competence that I witnessed was not the effect of agency and empowerment, but of conformity and regulation.

Taking into account these considerations, my answer to this question returns to the relevance of practice and my experience as a practitioner. As described at the start of this chapter, the performances I witnessed during the interviews were very similar to those I had seen pupils' perform in front of other audiences: it was them on their best behaviour, being model pupils, demonstrating their educational prowess. Taking part in the research provided them with one of the very few platforms in schools in which to perform this identity in relation to the subject of sex. In that sense, it was an important opportunity to test out, or try on, that identity, and to see what it might look like. These voices are not 'empowered' – they speak to the unequal power relation in their concealment and conformity – but they do play a very important role in pupils' sexual learning. In the case of the vast majority of pupils who passed through the SISTAZ project, this was the first time they had been able to talk about issues of sex/uality in this way. Being an 'authority', whether in the interview or in an assembly or to visitors to the school, was a way for pupils' to develop their confidence as public speakers and to talk confidently about sex. This should not be taken as their 'true' identity nor as a reflection of actual competence, but as one way of contributing to a competent sexual identity in their transition to adulthood.

Conclusion

Chapters 7 and 8 of this thesis were designed to bring the readers' attention to some of the other ways in which pupils engage with issues of sex/uality in schools. I have focused on a peer-led project facilitated by Learning Mentors, as an illustration of the kinds of environments and relationships that are open to pupils outside the formal curriculum. My aim with the SISTAZ project has been to highlight some of the alternative ways in which pupils engage with issues of sex/uality in more informal spaces. In so doing, I also wanted to explore what could be learnt about the wider difficulties facing teachers and pupils in schools.

Both of these chapters have illustrated that, when it comes to pupils' behaviour and narratives, there are no easy answers to the question of how to interpret their needs. In the case of both play and performance, I have demonstrated the importance of not taking their behaviour at face value. By analysing these forms of communication critically I sought to challenge the surface reading of pupils' behaviour and their accounts, both the uncomfortable and the convenient. Rather than suggesting that these represent the two poles of 'immaturity' and 'maturity', in terms of their handling of sexual material, I have suggested that they should be understood as examples of the struggles that take place in their efforts to make sense of the sexual world. By focusing on two discreet areas of pupils' communication in this forum, it is possible to get a window on these struggles and to identify the *field of reference* on which they draw. In this sense, pupils need opportunities to do both: to play with the serious aspects of sex/uality, and to find some relief from the relentless negative messages about sex; and also to have opportunities to explore alternative sexual subjectivities and test out confident, coherent sexual identities. Forums like the SISTAZ project provide pupils with opportunities to explore these and many other ways of engaging with issues of sex/uality in schools. They should be understood as vital platforms for pupils, which have much to tell us, as researchers and practitioners, about pupils' developing moral/sexual worlds. As such, the examples drawn on in the last two chapters of this thesis are an indication of how pupils communicate given these kinds of opportunities and what might be possible to learn if we turn our attention towards them.

Conclusion

Tackling the 'difficult' subject

In this thesis I have examined why it is so difficult to address issues of sex/uality in schools. This question has been explored through two key areas of provision; the formal delivery of Sex and Relationships Education as part of Personal, Social and Health Education, and the input provided by school-based support staff and 'specialist' sex educators. I took as a starting point the changes in New Labour's education policy since 1999 – changes that have meant that schools are now increasingly composed of non-teaching staff who are responsible for meeting a wide variety of pupils' needs. As illustrated in this thesis, this 'expanding children's workforce' has provided alternative forms of adult contact for pupils in schools and opened out opportunities as well as contexts for pupils to engage with issues of sex/uality. My research was based on three secondary schools in an urban area of high economic and social deprivation. As a consequence of New Labour's focus on tackling social exclusion, these schools qualified for local and national government funding through initiatives such as Excellence in Cities and Connexions, as well as input from charitable and local government-funded organisations. As such, these were useful sites to explore how the Labour government's agenda was manifested in the opportunities available for teaching and learning about sex in schools.

This thesis has not attempted to evaluate New Labour's social exclusion policy but to explore the lived experience of pupils, teachers and other staff in schools charged with implementing their education initiatives. In doing so, I aimed to locate the interactions I encountered as part of my daily experience as a practitioner, within a wider body of literature concerned with SRE provision. As with the majority of research in this field, this study was born of a personal concern about the level and standard of sex education provision for young people in secondary schools. It also came from an awareness of the failure of the literature to capture and explore the kinds of communication around sex/uality that I encountered in my working life.

Because of the flexibility of many of these roles, and because of the diversity of practices both within and between schools, I felt that a multi-method, multi-site ethnography conducted over a one-year period was the best way to capture this

diversity and to observe changes over time. The chapters in this thesis reflect the use of conventional research techniques such as interviews, focus groups and observation, alongside a more participatory approach whereby I took part in projects that were part of the existing fabric of schools and local organisations. By occupying different roles, and by placing myself in different contexts, I have endeavoured to take account of the complexity of schools and of the relationships within them. By taking a more participatory role, I have also chosen to turn the research lens back on myself; to use my experience in the classroom, my intuition in the research context, and my investments and disappointments in my practical work, as part of the subject of my research. In this sense, I have used my 'over-involvement' as a resource to draw upon in the research analysis. By interrogating my experience as both a researcher and a practitioner, I have uncovered aspects of school life that would not otherwise have commanded my attention in such an immediate way.

Each chapter in this thesis has focused on the specific moments or elements of my fieldwork that best captured the larger issues that surfaced during the course of my research. Before outlining the main conclusions of this research and their policy implications, the following section maps out how each chapter addressed the three main questions of this thesis:

1. Why is it so difficult to address issues of sex/uality in schools?
2. How are we to account for the problems and inadequacies of SRE?
3. How are we to understand the relationship between pupils' behaviour and their needs?

In Chapter 1, I drew on a diverse body of literature that addresses the problematic nature of sex education provision in UK secondary schools. I mapped out the three key areas that had been most significant in shaping my thinking about my own research: the structural/practical; the interactional; and the emotional. In doing so, I was also making a claim about what research in this field needed to address. These areas acted as guiding threads throughout my thesis, continually leading me away from a surface reading of events and towards a consideration of what other forces may be acting upon or through individuals in the school environment. In the first section, I outlined the contribution of the practice-based literature and argued that it was important to stay grounded in the practical reality of schools as modern,

bureaucratic institutions that are guided by budget constraints, professional targets and procedures for monitoring and evaluation. I suggested that it was useful to draw on the work of Bourdieu to think about how educational institutions are also places marked by class distinctions, contrasting forms of cultural capital and symbolic violence. I highlighted the existing ethnographic work on sexuality and schooling and the use of post-structuralist thought to understand schools as sites for the production of identities. I drew from this literature the importance of being attentive to the micro-politics of schooling and to the behaviours and practices that shape the everyday reality of school life for teachers and pupils. This was particularly significant for bringing to the foreground the contextually contingent nature of identity production and for thinking about the kinds of resources pupils draw upon in different school contexts. I then outlined the shift within the sociological and cultural studies approaches towards psychoanalysis and the incorporation of a more psychosocial framework.

I saw the incorporation of psychoanalytic theory and concepts as a useful way to understand the emotional aspects of interactions and communication in schools through the idea of an active unconscious that speaks through the subject. I highlighted that this had been particularly useful for thinking about interactions that did not appear to make sense during my research and for thinking about the meanings attached to certain forms of behaviour. I argued that, taken together, these three areas – the practical, the interactional and the emotional - constituted my theoretical framework but also acted as a framework for the analysis of my material and the importance of remaining alert to the possibilities of interpretation through these key areas. I suggested that while this gives the appearance of a smorgasbord of theoretical concepts and ideas, I argue that the challenge of this thesis necessitated developing a theoretical toolbox that was equal to the diversity and complexity of the interactions and the experiences I aimed to explore.

In Chapter 2, I took up the methodological issues facing youth research and my wariness about a research culture that privileges a particular kind of young subject. I questioned the presumption of the inherent value of research that emphasises participation at all levels and lays claim to empowering effects on its young participants. Using examples from my own research, alongside material from recent studies, I outlined why I felt these objectives were often over-simplified and naïve. I

argued that, by focusing on achieving these goals, researchers risked missing out on aspects of young peoples' lives that were less coherent and often less convenient for the supposed fulfilment of participation and empowerment. After challenging the reliance on participation and empowerment as the rubber stamp of 'good' youth research, I then built a case for a particular kind of ethnography which allows for the exploration of other platforms in which young people engage with issues of sex/uality that are of interest to research. I argued that we needed to retain a commitment to realist ethnography at the same time as recognising the limitations and partiality of this account. Following Skeggs (2001), I suggested that researchers needed to take responsibility for the stories they told, but also that they had a responsibility to interrogate those stories and their own perceptions and investments and responses during the course of the research.

Chapters 3 and 4 focused on the experiences of teachers and support staff and the question of why it is so difficult to address issues of sex/uality in schools. In Chapter 3, I examined the narratives of teachers alongside those of support staff to see how they understood their respective roles in relation to pupils' sexual learning. Through the narratives of teachers I highlighted the significant practical challenges facing teachers in the classroom in terms of a lack of training, resources and support. I illustrated that, for many teachers, conducting SRE in these circumstances is a demoralising and disempowering experience and that we should not be surprised that so many teachers look for ways to opt out of this responsibility. At the same time, I identified a number of less tangible factors that impacted on the success or failure of individual teachers to carve out an identity as an SRE teacher who is 'successful'. Drawing on Kehily (2002), I argued that there was no formula for success in SRE, but that success was related to whether or not teachers were able to draw on forms of cultural capital that pupils *valued*. I showed how some teachers were able to carve out alternative subjectivities by drawing on personal resources that were not conventionally valued in their role as pedagogues. The experiences of support staff illustrated that professional roles and expectations played a major part in shaping how adults approached issues of sex/uality with pupils. I showed that support staff were able to build a different kind of 'professional self' to that of teachers and that this was based around their ability to build relationships with pupils that were more 'democratic'(Bateman and Rhodes 2003). I also noted that support staff tended to come from more diverse backgrounds than teachers. Consequently, support staff

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drew on different forms of cultural capital in their interactions with pupils. The different approach of support staff to issues of sex/uality was understood in terms of *habitus* and their unspoken familiarity through shared dispositions. I argued that promixity through class, ethnicity and locality meant that support staff attached different meanings to pupils' communications around sex/uality and that this shaped the way in which they understood their supportive roles.

Chapter 4 continued the theme of professional roles and expectations in relation to a placement I undertook at Bard Community School. Using detailed descriptions of my experiences, it explored the unfolding dynamics between me as a 'specialist' sex educator, and Helen, a senior teacher and Form Tutor to a Year 9 class. This chapter examined the relationship between the 'liberal' sensitivities of 'experts' in SRE delivery and the guiding principles of a more traditional moral pedagogy. By reflecting on my experience in the classroom, I illustrated how SRE can act as an 'interruption' (Goffman 1959) to the everyday practices of teachers and to their experience of authority. I showed why this was sometimes difficult – both practically and emotionally – and what it meant for teachers to be left with neither a personal nor a professional model to draw on. I suggested that within a liberal discourse it was easy to ignore or sideline such concerns, but that these experiences presented real and significant challenges that needed to be addressed. The chapter aimed to provide clear examples of why it was so difficult for some teachers to address issues of sex/uality in the classroom and of what endeavouring to do so actually involved. In this chapter I argued that we must take account of these factors and that it was important to take teachers' emotional needs and experiences seriously.

Chapters 5 and 6 focused on pupils' experiences of SRE and on their behaviour in the classroom. Both chapters took up key themes in the literature which offer explanations for how we are to account for the problems and inadequacies of SRE. Chapter 5 challenged the assumption that because pupils tend to be negative about the capacities of their teachers to deliver SRE that this negativity should be taken simply as a reflection of poor teaching. Paying close attention to how pupils spoke about their teachers, and the inconsistencies both within and between their accounts and what I knew about their lessons and teachers, I suggested that there was another way in which these narratives could be read. Using insights from psychoanalytic

theory, I argued that the inconsistencies, and the extent to which pupils denigrated their teachers, were redolent of the unconscious. Drawing on theories about the emotional aspects of learning in which teachers occupy the position of 'parent-figures', I argued that accounts of SRE should be seen not just as narratives of experience but also of expectation. I showed that in their role as responsible and authoritative adults, teachers were invested with the task of being able to solve the concerns and uncertainties about sex/uality in pupils' transition to adulthood. I also suggested that, as 'parent-figures', teachers were expected to provide pupils with levels of support that were unrealistic. In this way, teachers were routinely set up to fail. This interpretation suggests that we should not take pupils' accounts of their experiences at face value because to do so misses one of the key aspects of their experience; that of emotional investment. I argued that challenging the surface account gives a different picture of pupils' needs and that this picture had important practical implications for teachers who were struggling in this field.

Chapter 6 took up a very different explanation for the inadequacies of SRE – that of the difficult behaviour of boys. Drawing on my experiences as a visiting sex educator at Moorefield School, I suggested that the 'problem' with boys was not the one given the most attention in research. Incorporating key themes in the literature, I examined my own experience of working in a boys school in relation to three areas; adult expectations, boys' use of pornography, and masculinity and homophobia. Using specific examples from classroom interactions, I showed that, by focusing on the resistant behaviour of a minority of dominant boys, we risked missing opportunities to engage with the majority in more meaningful ways. The preoccupation amongst practice-based and ethnographic research with documenting the most visible behaviour has taken attention away from the needs that often prompt that behaviour (and which are often disguised by it) as well as the needs of less vocal and visible pupils. I argued that one of the inadequacies of SRE was that it failed to engage with the real issues facing boys or to equip them to meet the challenges of their sexual and emotional development. I suggested that this development could be particularly problematic for boys because of the demands of building a male sexual identity within a highly restricted discursive field. The chapter underlined that adults, including 'specialist' sex educators, continued to rely on a 'comfort zone' of traditional gender roles and normative heterosexual masculinity in ways that were not just unhelpful but also potentially damaging.

The last two chapters in the thesis continued with the issue of how to interpret pupils'

needs given the difficulties presented by their behaviour. This issue was explored in

Chapters 7 and 8 by moving away from the classroom and the dynamics of the

teacher/pupil relationship to look at other, less conventional, spaces in which pupils

and adults engaged with issues of sex/uality. Focusing on one project – SISTAZ –

Chapters 7 and 8 illustrated how female pupils used this forum to experiment with

different aspects of their sexual subjectivities. In Chapter 7, I showed that play was

not simply 'messing about' or a mechanism used by young people to avoid talking

about sex. It was also sometimes the exact opposite – a way of exploring and

communicating issues of sex/uality that was alternative and 'safe'. I argued that

playful behaviour should neither be dismissed nor taken as a concealed truth, but as

an indication of the realm of possibility within which young people attempted to

fashion a coherent sexual identity. The idea of a *field of reference* was used to

suggest that play could be seen to represent the scope of possibility and an indication

of the kinds of resources young people drew upon. I argued that while there were

distinctly gendered aspects to this form of play, the SISTAZ project also revealed

many areas of similarity with the kinds of behaviour normally associated with boys.

Chapter 8 explored how pupils interpreted the evaluative interviews at the end of the

SISTAZ project as a platform for a particular enactment of self. I showed how

pupils drew on discursive resources to present a subject that was knowledgeable,

competent and 'in command of their teenage world' (Currie 2001). Based on my

familiarity with these individuals in other contexts, I argued that their voices and

what they chose to reveal and to conceal posed a challenge to the notion that such

research processes were 'empowering' them. I argued that the research context in

question provided important opportunities for young people to explore particular

identities but that these identities should not seen as a straightforward representation

of reality. Pupils' ability to perform an authoritative public voice was related closely

to their access to particular cultural capital and resources. I showed how the SISTAZ

project provided an alternative discourse that pupils could draw upon but that not all

pupils were able to access this discourse with the same level of competence. While

this voice was essentially conformist, I showed that pupils also used it creatively to

interpret aspects of their own lives. The material in Chapters 7 and 8 was used to

illustrate that more informal contexts outside the classroom allowed pupils to

experiment with their identities in important and significant ways. It suggested that these avenues force us to question assumptions about pupils' behaviour in the classroom and, in particular, the notion of an inevitable conflict between teachers and pupils. Both of these chapters argued that projects like SISTAZ illustrated how pupils managed a variety of messages and discourses around sex/uality and that their responses were not necessarily amenable to simple and singular interpretation. Pupils' responses may affirm or challenge our expectations of appropriate behaviour but they should not be taken as the responses of who pupils 'are', more as 'identities-in-process'.

Throughout these chapters I have highlighted the ways that examples drawn from my research were shaped by the three areas outlined in Chapter 1; the practical context in which schools function, the micro-cultures of school environments, and the emotional aspects of the school experience. Each example was taken as an illustration of how these factors combined both inside and outside of the classroom to produce very different results. One of the key methodological points to emerge from this research was the importance of not taking accounts at face value and of looking instead at the contexts in which accounts are given and at why individuals construct their accounts in particular ways.

Further research, policy implications and the struggles of adolescence
The SISTAZ project is just one example of the new and multiple forums that are being created in schools and of the new kinds of support that have become available. In the space of this thesis I have not had the opportunity to explore other informal spaces in which I, and other members of support staff, engaged pupils around issues of sex/uality. At the time of this research these included a supportive forum for Turkish/Kurdish pupils, a group run by a 'specialist' worker for pupils identified as being at risk of sexual exploitation, and a peer-education project in which Year 10s wrote and delivered PSHE lessons to Year 7 classes. These are just some examples of the kinds of forums available to pupils to engage with issues of sex/uality outside of the dynamics of the traditional teacher/pupil relationship in the SRE classroom. These spaces and interactions would greatly benefit from further investigation. A further point of interest would be to investigate the relationships between the kinds of support available to pupils and the makeup of the student body. This would include a consideration of the provision available in private/public schools which remains a

significant absence in the literature on sexuality and schooling. As indicated in my introduction, further academic attention is also needed in relation to the supportive work that is *already* being carried out by traditional members of school support staff such as dinner ladies and administrative staff.

Emerging from this thesis are two particular points that may have implications for SRE-related policymaking. The first is that not everyone finds it difficult to address issues of sex/uality in schools. All of the support staff I spoke with during my research had something positive to say regarding their communications with pupils about sex/uality and about the discussions they had had with individual pupils, groups and, in some cases, whole classes. In contrast, even those teachers who had managed to make their role 'work' and had achieved some success in SRE recognised that they had done so against the odds. As illustrated in Aileen's case, in Chapter 3, success is sometimes the silent exception that proves the rule. Aileen's achievements had to be kept hidden so as to not upset the prevailing negativity and resignation amongst the rest of the teaching staff. What I hoped to have demonstrated through this research was that, outside of the formal curriculum, there are many school staff who address issues of sex/uality with pupils on a regular basis in often innovative, creative and engaging ways. These individuals are people who often have a very different set of skills and experiences to those of teachers and who have entered the field with very different professional expectations. When it comes to addressing issues of sex/uality in schools, support staff and specialist sex educators on the fringes of school life are proceeding with the task in less visible ways.

One of the implications of the increasing role played by support staff in addressing issues of sex/uality with pupils, is that there is now an expanding gap between the discussion taking place at a national level about the status of formal SRE provision, and the work that is actually being done in schools. While government debate and coverage in the national press continues to contest the efficacy and viability of compulsory SRE in schools, the demands of the Children's Act (2004) and the initiatives of the Social Exclusion Unit (1999) require that schools make provision for pupils' sexual learning in order to meet their objectives and achieve their targets. This work is occurring formally, informally and sometimes in ad hoc ways as a growing number of support staff are setting up projects and forging links with local

organisations to provide pupils with support and information and to address the needs and concerns that are not being met through the curriculum. This could be seen as a positive development, in that the role is increasingly being carried out by those who have the skills, experience and the enthusiasm for the job. But in shifting responsibility in this way it increases the gap between those members of staff, and the teachers who are left struggling with a weekly task for which they do not feel prepared or supported. This is compounded by negative criticisms from pupils, and the often unfamiliar sense of disempowerment and failure experienced by teachers in this role. Within the current policy framework, this is the two-track path of sex education provision in schools.

It is worth noting that there are some schools that have responded to this situation by shifting the relationship between teachers and support staff. One of the Learning Mentors I interviewed was subsequently appointed a Deputy Head of Year with responsibility for pastoral support. Recognising the key role played by Learning Mentors, the senior management had chosen to create a new middle management role which combined the skills of teaching and non-teaching staff. In Charlesford School, the Lead Learning Mentor was later promoted to the post of Inclusion Manager and made part of the Senior management team. These shifts in the make-up of school management to include non-teaching staff were exceptions, but they are perhaps also a sign of things to come.

The second point to highlight from this research is that we need to move away from thinking about sex education in terms of a control/resistance dynamic. As I argued in Chapters 5 and 6, there is no doubt that pupils want to talk about sex/uality in school environments and that they look to authoritative adults to fulfil that task. As also illustrated in this thesis, the behaviour of pupils and the responses of teachers can make it difficult to identify that need or for teachers to engage with it in ways that are meaningful. This can be a difficult and demoralising experience for both teachers *and* pupils, something which was visible in the interviews, focus groups and observational material in this thesis.

The experiences of support staff and specialist educators however, demonstrate that, when it comes to addressing issues of sex/uality, there is no inherent conflict between adults in schools and the pupils they work with. This relationship may be

characterised by struggle, and the use of the term 'tackling' in my title is indicative of this struggle, but I do not believe that this is a struggle founded on an unavoidable generational conflict. As described by a Learning Mentor in Chapter 3, when it comes to addressing issues of sex/uality with pupils, 'sometimes you've got to name it'. By anticipating the discussion and raising the issues themselves, these mentors were able to defuse the power of sexual language and the balance of sexual knowledge and move away from the control/resistance dynamic. As described by Sarah, this can be a huge relief for pupils in that it takes away the uncertainty about the status of sexual knowledge in their relationships with authoritative adults. In this thesis I have identified a number of different areas of struggle; between expectation and disappointment, between liberal and traditional perspectives, between professional commitments and personal attitudes, between the desire for adult support and the need to push it away. Common to these struggles is the desire to establish an authority over sex. The pressure – both on teachers and on pupils – to present oneself as an 'expert' in public forums, becomes the site of struggle as it taps in to the anxieties of individuals about what they know, what they should know and what is the status of that knowledge. As described by Gilber (2007), any effort to establish this authority will inevitably confront the 'impossibility' of positioning oneself as an 'expert' (p.47). It is, in this sense a struggle which is both inevitable and ultimately irresolvable.

In this thesis I have shown that underlying the public manifestation of pupils' behaviour lies a desire for adults to have the answers. As also illustrated, many adults are bewildered by the responsibility adolescents put upon them in their transition to adulthood. In the SRE classroom, the practical barriers, behavioural pressures and internal anxieties come to bear in ways that can be explosive and ultimately unhelpful. But this is not because adults do not have anything to share with pupils nor that pupils do not want to hear and indeed have a great desire to learn what they have to say. These are struggles over meaning and they are struggles over identity. But they are not generational struggles. The focus on pupils' disruptive behaviour and the teachers' failing efforts to maintain control puts the emphasis in the wrong place. Instead, we need to reconsider why pupils' resistant behaviour is so common, what it conceals and what it means to be 'in control' in the sex education classroom.

This is an argument for giving the responsibility for delivering sex education in schools to those who have the skills and the confidence to diffuse the control/resistance dynamic. This means advocating the task to those adults who recognise the responsibility with which they are invested by pupils, and the fragility and uncertainty of their position. But it is also about reconfiguring how we understand pupils' behaviour in a broader sense. There are many teachers who may not have an 'open', 'liberal' attitude to sex, but with the right support could make valuable contributions to pupils' sexual learning. This could be helped by taking account of the findings of this thesis: that how pupils behave is an indication of how they feel – but not necessarily in any obvious or direct way. If we consider that pupils behave badly because of their uncertainty about boundaries, their anxiety about their peers and their desire to have their concerns addressed; that they are negative about their teachers because they are easily disappointed; and that they play around with sexual themes because they need to experiment with those feelings; then it may be easier for teachers to situate their role in a way that makes sense. That is, it may be easier to live with the fact that pupils are unlikely to make this job easy or necessarily thank them for their efforts.

Drawing on Winnicott (1979), this acceptance of the difficulties of addressing issues of sex/uality could be understood in terms of allowing adolescents their 'immaturity' and recognising that their behaviour is part of their struggle to define a coherent sexual identity. As highlighted in this thesis, there are a number of forces that conspire against adolescents being allowed the opportunity to be immature. This is particularly the case in schools where it conflicts with the demands of teachers to maintain 'control' of a classroom. Perhaps what is most needed are contexts in which adolescents are able to position themselves as having 'identities-in-process'; contexts where fluctuations between states of immaturity and maturity, competence and weakness, knowledge and ignorance, dominance and fragility are accepted and understood.

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