

Report: Healthy Sexual Development Symposium, Bristol, 3 July 2015

By Naomi Rudoe (Lecturer in Sociology, University of Westminster)

On Friday 3 July, 2015, Alice Hoyle (Coordinator of the RSE Hub) and I welcomed 45 delegates and seven co-presenters to the **Healthy Sexual Development Symposium: *How relationships and sex education can contribute towards healthy sexual development: research into practice*** at 2 Rivergate in Bristol. This event was designed to bring together practitioners, teachers, researchers and academics to look at the links between research and practice in sexuality, sexual development and relationships and sex education, and to try to relate our various expertise to the framework of the Fifteen Domains of Healthy Sexual Development. This framework was originally conceived by Professor Alan McKee of the University of Technology, Sydney, and had been adapted and developed by the RSE Hub.

The symposium was generously funded and supported by the RSE Hub, as well as by the Gender and Education Association, who provided £300 of seedcorn funding, and by the University of Westminster.

The event drew a wide variety of delegates, including those working in public health and medicine, youth workers, sexual health practitioners, local authority Healthy Schools professionals, independent SRE consultants, school teachers, teacher trainers, academics, and students in various disciplines. This proved to be an exciting mix of people, all of whom were enthusiastic participants in activities and discussions.

Alan McKee (Professor in Media and Communications at the University of Technology, Sydney) had made a video keynote for the symposium, and we began by viewing this (the video can be viewed [here](#)). Alan explained how he and colleagues had developed the concept of the Fifteen Domains (with an article published in 2010 in the *International Journal of Sexual Health*), and how it forms a useful starting point for thinking about where, how and what young people learn about sex and relationships. He also made the point that he has noticed, over the course of his recent research with young people, that there is very little education about consent.

The Fifteen Domains of Healthy Sexual Development (as developed by the RSE Hub) are:

1. Respect and understanding of consent
2. Understanding of anatomy, physiology, dysfunction, fertility and sexual response
3. Ability to maintain safety (legally, physically and emotionally)
4. Understand how to achieve, maintain and negotiate healthy relationships with peers, family, partners and the wider community
5. Openness to exploring sexuality, gaining knowledge and asking for help as part of life-long learning
6. Celebrate sexuality, pleasure and the joy of sex and healthy relationships
7. Understand own values/beliefs and how they impact on decision-making and behaviour
8. Ability to comprehend, establish and respect boundaries
9. Build resilience to be able to manage any unwanted outcomes
10. Developing personal skills
11. Having an awareness of the diversity of sexual behaviour throughout the lifespan
12. Appreciation of the diversity of sexual orientation and gender identities
13. Understanding of varying gender roles in cultures and societies
14. Applying critical analysis to media representations
15. Developing a positive attitude to their own concept of self

Alan's video was followed by a keynote speech from Dr Simon Forrest, Head of School of Medicine, Pharmacy and Health, Durham University, entitled 'Sex and Relationships Education: Evidence, application and opportunity'. Simon addressed the question of what gets in the way of effective

sex education, raising the issues of concerns about innocence, about knowledge leading to experimentation, and to public 'knowledge' feeding into ideas of what is 'normal' and 'acceptable'. Taking a historical perspective, Simon looked at the changing sexual practices and behaviour in the UK over the past few decades, and at changing cultural norms around sex (and for example, in particular, around teenage pregnancy, which historically has been seen as 'normal' but is now pathologised). In terms of the potential difficulties in relation to effective SRE, Simon highlighted the weakness of SRE within school curricula, poorly trained and supported staff, neglect of non-biological aspects of sex and of 'sensitive' topics, and conflicts over the moral orientation of SRE. He pointed to the challenges and opportunities arising: the need for better application of theory in practice, taking a sex-positive approach, challenging gender stereotypical behaviour, enhancing young people's skills and provision of 'safe' spaces for discussion, and overcoming wider cultural factors that inhibit effective SRE.

In an introductory session on how to adapt the Fifteen Domains of Healthy Sexual Development for practitioners, Gail McVicar (RSE Consultant) asked participants 'What would a sexually healthy person with great sex education look like?', what the barriers are to this, and what new challenges practitioners are experiencing. This was a fascinating brainstorming session, and we followed it up with an activity in which we asked each table of participants to discuss and make suggestions in relation to the draft document of the Fifteen Domains that we had prepared summarising each domain. A number of interesting comments were made, including whether we could avoid hierarchizing the domains by representing them in an infographic rather than numbering them, whether the language was too secondary-school-specific, and whether it was possible to focus more on how these would look in practice when feeding into particular skills and knowledge.

This was followed by a talk from Dr Ester McGeeney, a Youth Researcher and Practitioner working at Brook. Ester's PhD research drew on 35 years of argument for inclusion of pleasure in SRE, and she focused on why it is important to include pleasure in SRE and the challenges involved in doing so. She talked briefly about how to do this in practice, and in her afternoon workshop, she ran a series of activities that practitioners could use with colleagues and/or young people to encourage them to talk about pleasure and think critically about sex, pleasure and consent (more details can be found at <https://goodsexproject.wordpress.com/>).

In the last session before lunch, I gave a talk looking at sexuality education in schools through the lens of research with lesbian and gay teachers and education policy in relation to sexual orientation and homophobic bullying. I outlined the importance of taking a whole-school approach to challenging heteronormativity and homophobia, rather than leaving it to lesbian and gay teachers, who may or may not be prepared to act as role models for pupils, with all teachers taking responsibility for challenging pupils about the gender binary, about homophobia, and educating about family diversity, transgender people, and taking an inclusive approach to SRE.

Over lunch participants completed 'learning rabbits', a reflective activity that involved summing up their learning for the morning, and posting this on the wall to enable networking based on different ideas. Many participants had written reflections relating to how to include pleasure in SRE.

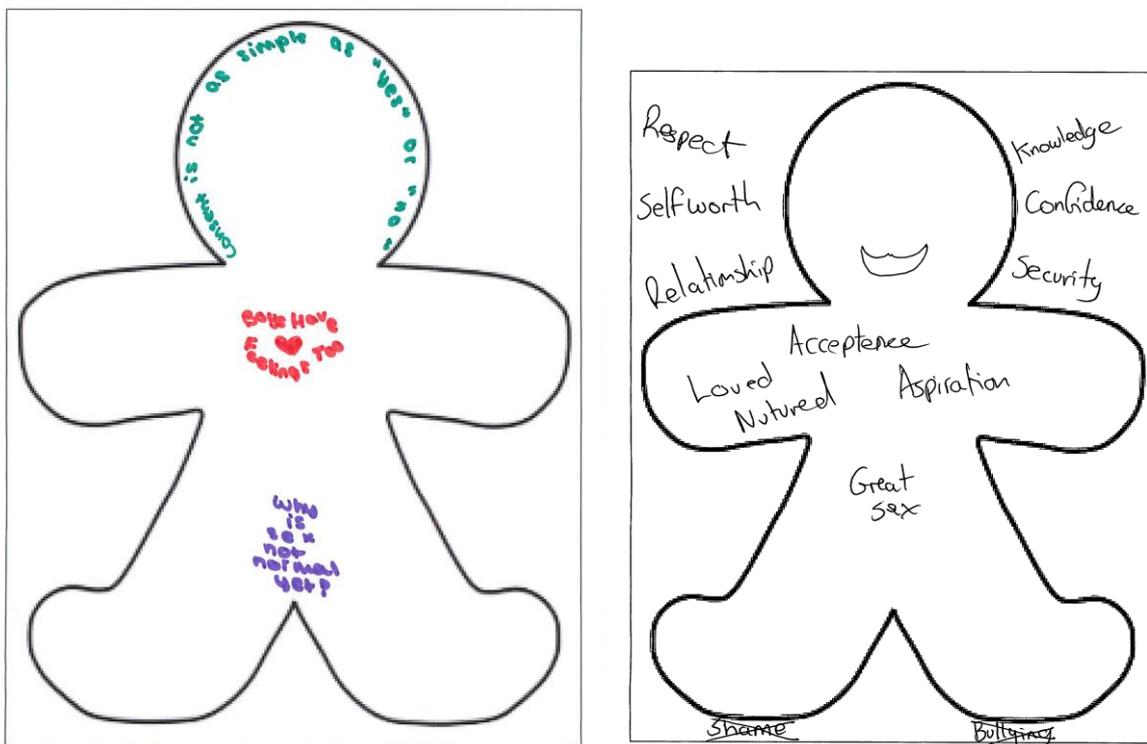
After lunch participants could attend two workshops out of a total of seven offered. Professors Kate Fisher and Rebecca Langlands from the University of Exeter ran a workshop about their *Sex and History* project, which uses historical objects relating to sex and sexuality as a stimulus for classroom discussions with young people about relationships and sex. They shared an exemplar teaching resource that was produced in conjunction with the RSE Hub.

Gail McVicar's workshop looked at how the Fifteen Domains could be used in working with young women. Participants undertook several hands-on activities, including a competition to build models of the male and female reproductive system using material including fruit, nuts, sweets, balloons and condoms! Simon Forrest's workshop focused on working with boys and young men. Participants considered what specific topics it might be appropriate and necessary to address with

boys and young men and approaches to engaging young men with these. Some of the challenges in this area were identified, as well as the ways that provision and activity might be differentiated according to age and need.

Alice ran a workshop on consent involving specific activities for the classroom to explore consent with young people, including Meg John Barker and Justin Hancock's Three Handshakes activity, a card sort involving recognising consent according to verbal and non-verbal signals, and a traffic light activity involving scenarios relating to coercion, incapacity and proceeding from one sexual activity to another. Alice also ran a workshop on supporting LGBT students within the framework of the Fifteen Domains, which looked at evidence-based practice in challenging homophobia, transphobia, biphobia, sexist and sexual bullying, with activities that could be carried out with practitioners and young people to explore sexuality and gender identity. Jocelyne Tagg and Jess Herman from Brook Bristol gave a workshop on Brook's Sexual Behaviours Traffic Light Tool. This resource supports professionals in making consistent responses and safeguarding decisions about the sexual behaviour of children and young people aged up to 17 years. Using a values continuum activity, the workshop explored professional dilemmas faced where personal values about sexual behaviour might conflict with professional values. The group then looked at the different elements of the toolkit and used it to consider a number of scenarios. The overall feedback was that the tool could be very useful and they will access it via the Brook website.

Finally participants came together and, while listening to songs from The Songwriting Experiment, part of the Wellcome Trust's Sounds of Sexology project, completed 'bodies of reflection' that were again displayed on the wall and used as an informal evaluative exercise for the day. Participants were asked to reflect on the impact of the day, either on themselves personally or on an individual in society if they had developed an understanding and realisation of all fifteen domains of healthy sexual development.



Thirty-two participants completed an official evaluation form for the event; of these, 90% agreed or strongly agreed that the stated aims were met, that the event was well organised, and that the ideas presented and discussed were valuable. Participants stated that the event would influence work in their setting in a variety of ways: many had discovered new resources and activities that

they could investigate and use, and some expressed a renewed motivation to practise more effectively and be more young-people focused.

In relation to integrating the Fifteen Domains of Healthy Sexual Development into their practice, participants stated that they would share this with colleagues and other organisations; that they would integrate it into teaching in FE; that they would use it to articulate a powerful rationale for their work in relation to stake holders; that they would explore its use with student teachers; that they would use it in training sessions with young people’s substance misuse teams; that they would use the framework in teacher continuing professional development; and that it would be used as a reference for best practice in teaching and for developing lesson plans.

Individual comments about strengths of the symposium on the evaluation forms included:

The opportunity to converse with others was really valuable;

I have learnt a lot and increased my enthusiasm;

Very innovative and creative methods throughout the day kept us alert and active;

I loved the way the discussion was positive and not about the problems and structural barriers we face;

Thank you for a very worthwhile event;

Very enjoyable day, engaging, useful, and really good networking;

An excellent day – interesting, thought-provoking and well thought-out – thank you!

The one issue that several participants brought up was that they wished they had been able to attend every workshop.



Some play-doh models made by delegates inspired by the Fifteen Domains of Healthy Sexual Development (an ice-breaker activity).
