The sound of silence? Sex education and censorship in Britain

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Abstract

In the 20th century European countries recognised the need of young people to receive sex education within the limitations of what was perceived morally acceptable. Sweden was a pioneer in introducing sex education in its curriculum. On the other hand, Great Britain lags behind. A fragile balance has emerged between private and public spheres, the parents ‘rights to educate their children themselves and the governmental task to preserve and control citizens ‘health, between the forces of the past and the visions of future. Sex education is a powerful indicator of social and cultural change. Yet, in Great Britain the mere allusion to the term sparks numerous debates on the amount of information to provide children and young people with or to censor to protect their ‘innocence’. For some, sex education acts as a brake on morality and, for others it is essential to prevent, for instance, public health issues such as the rather high rates of teenage pregnancies, and increasing rates in STIs and STDs among young people. The issue of censorship is not trivial in this sensitive and contentious context. This article explores the history of sex education in Great-Britain from the late 19th to the early 21st century and the politics of censorship towards sex education.

Keywords: Great Britain, sex education, censorship, controversy, 20th and 21st centuries
Introduction

Since the 19th century it seems that sex education in Great Britain has been closely associated with key-words such as silence, ignorance, contamination, fear, and loss of innocence. Sexual ignorance and the culture of silence around sexuality were corroborated by oral historians (Humphries, 1988, 108). In the Victorian era, The Contagious Disease Acts of the 1860s entailed the creation of the Social Purity Movement whose main target was the working-class supposedly needing moral re-education. The social purity movement questioned the complete sexual ignorance of young women (Nelson, 1997). And for social purists, “to speak out was vital and knowledge through education was power” (Mort, 1987, 114). Then, the social hygiene movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was involved in disseminating sex education. In the 1940s, during the Second World War, due to the spread of venereal diseases, sex education was in the limelight. In the 1980s with the advent of HIV and AIDS, sex education was again on the agenda. Next, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the increases in teenage pregnancy rates triggered more discourses on sex education from politicians and public opinion.

This recurrent and seasonal theme has always been a controversial topic sparking heated debates and discussed in the contexts of controlling women, decreasing unwanted pregnancies, or sexual health, notably in the context of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and AIDS, and is now depicted as a mess (Heritage, 2010) in contemporary Great Britain. Sex education seems an intractable issue, as there are mixed feelings for politicians and the general public as regards more sex education or less of it.

In this article, sex education encapsulates “the topic delivered in schools and regulated by the state or taking place within the private sphere of the family or received via peers and through the media” (Sauerteig and Davidson, 2009). It “belongs to the private, public, medical and educational spheres and over decades governments have not interfered in sexual matters to keep their voters” (Hall, 2000). This article will explore the history and development of sex education from the Victorian era to 2013. The first section of the article relates the main steps of the history of sex education from the Victorian era to this day and questions silence surrounding the topic and the myth of ignorance. The second section focuses on censorship and politics as regards sex education. Censorship pertained to sex education is both moral and political and defined as "the removal, suppression, or restricted circulation of literary, artistic or educational materials . . . on the grounds that these are morally or otherwise objectionable in the light of standards applied by the censor" (Reichman, 1988). Censorship is aimed at material that is believed to be unspeakable, too private to be public (Klein, 1999).

From social hygiene to 21st century sex education: a history of silence and the myth of ignorance

Since Victorian times the history of sex education has hinged on two key-words, silence and ignorance (Soldati, 2011). Historians wrote about the silence on sex and birth control in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Cook, 2004) and the discussion about the need for sex education dates back to the Victorian era (Hall,
2009, 19). There has been a strong tradition of discretion – which might better be described as nervous evasiveness - about sex in Britain (Hall, op. cit., 2).

It was not until the mid 1850s that young people’s information on birth control started being disseminated. Sex education materials focused on boys’ and girls’ awareness of the relationship between sex, health and fitness (Schofield and Vaughan-Jackson, 1912), and when sex education took place at school it was in the context of hygiene.

In 1880, Miss Agnes Cotton, the founder of the first Moral Welfare Home for Children talked in plain language to her pupils: “Every little bit of our bodies is given to us by God our Father, and to be used for the work he made it for – and nothing else”. She talked about “eyes, ears, etc., and by degrees and in small parties or one by one, speaking of the more secret things” (Cotton, 1880). In the mid 1880, the British Medical Journal was favourable to pupils learning basic sexual facts about anatomy and physiology.

In the early 20th century, social hygiene was the phrase used to mean current sex education. The issue pertaining to school sex education has always been to find the right balance between the amount of knowledge supplied to children and the preservation of innocence, particularly for girls. According to purist and eugenist Dr Schofield, “the language of sex education needed to be systematically ‘eugenized’, shifting the signification away from the ‘sexual’ to the ‘racial’”. Teachers were never to use the term ‘sexual’; the word ‘racial’ was free of objection and resentment from parents (Mort, op. cit., 186). This strategy speaks volume and testifies of embarrassment and the intricacies of sex education pioneers. In the same vein, the first ever document to mention ‘sex education’ in its title was published in 1943 (Hampshire, 2005).

In 1913, girls from Dronfield elementary school in Derbyshire received sex education by Miss Outram, both a eugenist and feminist teacher and headmistress who informed them of pregnancy and childbirth. Frank Mort reckons that “the case illustrates the ever present debate about openness on sex education and social control or the fear of the loss of innocence” (Mort, ibidem, 156-157).

In 1914, the London County Council adopted a resolution banning sex education from their schools (Stanley, 1995, 86). And, when Marie Stopes received her vast correspondence in the wake of the publication of Married Love in 1918, she construed that there was an obvious and blatant need for sex education.

In 1920, educational films were shown, conferences were organised at which sex education in schools and homes were discussed; still, stories of ignorance prevailed in the historian records especially for adolescents, but all walks of life of British society were concerned until the first half of the 20th century. Particularly for working-class young people gangster films were considered detrimental to boys while sex images threatened girls’ innocence (Smith, 2005, 55). The recurring question is was it a matter of protecting children or controlling them? In the 1920s, the Workers Birth Control Group (WBCG) campaigned exclusively within the Labour Party to widen access to contraceptive knowledge (Brooke, 2011, 5).
In the interwar years, although there were some improvements, formal sex education was still limited. Still, the 1925 Report of the Departmental Committee on Sexual Offences Against Young Persons recommended ‘sex education and the provision of facilities for healthy indoor and outdoor recreation as preventive measures (to child sexual abuse). Feminist proposals for prevention also included sex education, …’. In 1927, the Board of Education advised sex education at the discretion of schools but few followed the recommendation (Weeks, 1981, 211). In 1929, Janet Chance \(^2\) opened a sex education centre in Kensington, London, for working-class women, but her initiative was unimportant compared to countries such as Germany, Austria, Scandinavia and Switzerland (Weeks, ibidem, 212). The marriage guidance movement took sex instruction as one of the pillars of training young Britons for companionate marriage (Lewis, 1990).

In the early 20th century, popular cultural discourses included sex and there were a great many books on sex and one must not assume that there was complete silence over sex or that it was a taboo subject. The problem lay on information disseminated being contradictory and ambiguous, thus partial and distrusted. What is more, women self-censored the information they gathered, preferring to play an ignorant role because of the social implications it would entail, and tarnished reputation (Fisher, 2006).

Commentators observed that until the 1940s the British government had remained silent on the issue whereas researchers speak of ‘‘traditional silence’’ (Hampshire and Lewis, 2004; Crowther, 2009) although there is evidence that school sex education had been a controversial issue since the Victorian times. Should one infer that silence is synonymous with censorship?

During the Second World War, because of the evacuation of population and movement of military men, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) proliferated. In 1942, school sex education focused on the prevention of STDs (Hampshire, 2005). Gradually sex education in Great Britain was taught by using figures of speech, and evasive explanations on the reproduction of animals and flowers and taught in biology classes, hence the idiomatic expressions ‘the birds and the bees’, ‘the facts of life’, ‘the stork brings them under the gooseberry bush’ used in regard to sex education for children.

In 1943, the Board of Education stated that sex education was of the ‘prior responsibility’ of parents. Although recognising that many did not take the responsibility, the Board did not set up sex education classes (Hampshire, op. cit.) but issued a pamphlet on Sex Education In Schools and Youth Organisations (Weeks, ibidem, 255). In Eustace Chesser’s seminal sex survey of 1956 more women received sex education from medical and teaching staff and other adults (Chesser, 1956, 421). He stressed the growth of sexual knowledge and education, and the emancipation of women.

When again STDs were rife in the 1950s and 1960s, sex education really became a political issue as a remedy to sexual health issues. Silence was alluded to again in another document of the mid 1960s, ‘‘In some quarters there is still a conspiracy of silence’’ (Ministry of Health, 1965, 82-83) while ignorance, which implied respectability, innocence and moral purity (Porter and Hall, 1995, 27)
constituted an identity for women. But gin and pieces of bark were reported considered abortifacients for instance (Drabble, 1958, 8-14; Sillitoe, 1958, 85).

Following the societal changes of the 1960s and 1970s, school sex education had to adapt with more topics discussed and with more explicit biology textbooks. Still, despite more books on sex education being released, Mrs Mary Whitehouse3 launched a legal action to ban The Little Red School Book, (Hansen and Jenson, 1971) first published in Great Britain in 1971 and providing advice about teachers, school work, drugs and sex. It was deemed obscene and published in the country in a censored form that same year.

In the 1970s, the increase in the number of teenage mothers fuelled research on young people’s experience in terms of sex education and their knowledge of birth control (Farrell, 1978). The 1970s are a turning point between what society perceived as ‘normal’ and ‘deviant’ sexuality. Yet, it emerged that young people were receiving too little rather than too much sex education whether at home or at school and this was still an embarrassing topic to talk about in the private or public sphere. The advent of HIV virus and AIDS in the mid 1980s and its rapid spreading internationally put a brief halt to the situation and health issues were discussed and sex education at school became a recurrent theme of the political agenda. The 1985 Gillick case4, homosexual movements gaining power polarised attention on sex education on all fronts. Many Acts and amendments have ensued and sex education has become an omnipresent or seasonal though contentious topic. It is broached particularly when teenage conception or sexually transmitted disease rates among young people are increasing worryingly, because the content of sex education programmes are deemed partly responsible for the high rates of teenage conception in Britain. The fears generated by the content of sex education, particularly when related to the teaching about homosexuality, still prevail to this day.

The previous Conservative governments (1979-1997) had assumed loss of innocence and corruption if young people were to receive sex education, thus reinforcing a culture of secrecy (Vincent, 1998). Hence, they implemented guidance to schools on how to address the issue while supporting abstinence.

In 1994, a guide to sex education geared at teenagers was withdrawn because its ‘‘terminology and style made it ‘smutty and not suitable’’” (Hall, ibidem, 194).

The 1997-2010 Labour governments were more involved than their Conservative predecessors in putting sex education on the agenda, especially as Tony Blair pledged to halve the teenage conception rates by 2010 through better access to contraception and advice, and better sex education. So far, the present Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition has remained rather silent as regards its policy on home and school sex education, especially as Michael Gove has made it clear that he is not interested in sex relationship and education (SRE) because he does not want to tell schools what to teach (Brooks, 2013).

**Sex education, censorship and politics**

In Great Britain, there is no law against giving sex education, but there is “resistance from the authorities” (Schofield, 1973, 56) and it is a highly politicised
issue. “A whole range of forces, bearing on teachers and the education system has marginalised sex education” (Hall, 2009, 21). The National Union of Teachers in the early 1970s feared that sex education would be censored according to political rather than educational needs (Hampshire, ibidem). As Linda Chion-Kenney points out, “virtually any decision made by school board members concerning what is taught, used, and learned in school can be viewed as the act of a censor” (1989).

Since 1980, sex education lessons have continued to cause controversy. In the 1980s, there were debates between the left and the right with the Conservatives arguing that sex education was corrupting children. In 1980, an amendment to an Education Bill suggested that head teachers would inform parents of any provision of sex education and that they would be able to inspect teaching materials and withdrawing their children from sex education lessons. The amendment was dropped and controversy ensued. Then, in 1981, the funding of the Family Planning Association and Brook Centres were threatened if some of their materials were not withdrawn. In 1982, the Ministry of Education wanted more materials removed (Durham, 1991).

Sex education was referred to explicitly by statute in England and Wales for the first time in the 1986 Education Act. Ann Blair and Daniel Monk (2009, 40) reckoned that the interference of the government made the 1986 Act redundant, as it stipulated that only schools were responsible for sex education. Still, the 1986 Education Act stated that school governors and head masters now had the authority to decide how sex education would be taught. Before the 1986 Education Act, head teachers were free to decide how sex education was to be taught and were influenced by Local Education Authorities (LEAs). In 1986, LEAs, boards of governors and teaching staff were to make sure sex education was taught within the framework of morality and traditional family values (Durham, op. cit., 105-106) and the 1986 Education Act posited that schools would take on the responsibility of sex education thus putting aside LEAs and giving parents more power within school governor boards.

The introduction of the National Curriculum with the 1988 Education Reform Act resulted in science becoming a compulsory subject in its own right, creating a dichotomy. From then on, both the ‘biological aspects of human reproduction’ were taught and ‘‘the non biological aspects’ of sex education were further marginalised’’ (Blair and Monk, op. cit., 39).

The Children Act 1989, enforced in 1991 (DoH), specified the duties of local authorities towards young people they were responsible for in terms of advice and support, touching on relationship and health issues. The fear that talking about sex would be an incentive to have sex is the main reason put forward together with the fear it would encourage homosexuality. This appeared explicitly in section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988: “A local authority shall not promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship”. The introduction of Clause 28 banned local authorities from publishing or teaching anything which may promote homosexuality or its acceptability. Hence, Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin was censored as the children’s book dealt with gays (Bösche, 1983). And “explicit ‘safe sex’ information for gays and sex education pamphlets for teenagers have been victims of the government censor” (Socialist Review, 1994). Section 28 enactment caused more problems.
Homosexuality was a concern pertained to AIDS and HIV virus which became topics taught in science at school in 1991 causing more debates which led to the 1993 Education Act. Sex education became a compulsory subject for all secondary school pupils in 1993 though without being included in the national curriculum. The Secretary of State for Education, Kenneth Baker, was to ensure that pupils would not receive education on HIV/AIDS and STIs. The 1993 Act emphasised self-censorship from schools who did not want to act against parents as schools were accountable to them, and they did not want their school to get a bad reputation (Blair and Monk, op. cit., 43).

Michael Portillo, in a sententious speech delivered at the Centre for Policy Studies declared that “If parents believe it is the duty of schools to teach their children right and wrong, they may abandon their own responsibilities” (Charlot, 2000, 849). According to Valerie Riches (2004), the government’s approach to teenagers’ sexual health is not based on research, but on the ideology which sees in the state the parent of every child. Sex education has never been aimed at preventing unwanted teenage pregnancies nor STIs, but increasing the role of the state while changing the family structure.

In 1992, in the White paper The Health of the Nation, sex education and contraceptive advice were aimed at young people to decrease teenage conception rates. Yet, the solutions proposed by the government to solve the issue were contradictory. In May 1994, Baroness Cumberlege recommended the provision of condoms for 12 year-olds to decrease the under-20 conception rates, which corresponded to the objective of The Health of The Nation. John Patten argued stricter sex education in school to protect innocent children from knowledge and no explicit information on sex were to be provided. It was not until 1993 that teachers in maintained schools in England and Wales were, by law, required to provide sex education programmes, though the vast majority had their own sex education programme in place by the 1970s and 1980s.

Currently, under the 1996 Education Act, parents have the right to withdraw their children from sex education. The 1996 Education Act has created anomalies as regard sex education and contraceptive advice at school and has put obstacles to the dissemination of information. On the one hand, parents can ask for their children not to attend sex education classes. On the other hand, the law amended the national curriculum in science, as all references to HIV, AIDS and STIs were erased. This Act assumed the right to parents to withdraw their children from lessons on the non-biological aspects of sexual health and human relationships, even if children were over sixteen, the age of consent. The teaching of sex education was supposed to encourage young people to have sex. But, young people who receive consistent school sex education are more likely to use contraceptive methods (Camper, 2006), and attendance at sex education classes has a positive outcome on reducing teenage pregnancy and STD rates (DfH&E, 2000, Corlyon and Stock, 2009, 13-14).

Improving sex education teaching used to be one of the priorities of the former Labour governments (1997-2010): their election entailed changes such as the repeal of section 28 in 2003 and school guidance to prevent “homophobic bullying and encourage a more liberal and inclusive approach to sexuality” (DfEE, 2000). The 2000 Learning and Skills Act reinforced the teaching of traditional family values and
the protection of children from any inappropriate teaching and materials. In July 2000, new directives to clarify the content and approach of what schools should provide pupils to inform them and avoid them taking risks came into application. Directives for Primary Care Trusts and health authorities were given in connection with the types of services young people need and the people they trust to improve contraception services. In areas where sex education was taught in a vast majority of schools and included Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE), rates of teenage conceptions had fallen. Schools had to provide parents methods to speak about sex and interpersonal relationships (DfEE, op. cit., 9-10). The key role for secondary schools is to delay the onset of sexual activities and to reduce the outcome of unwanted teenage pregnancies (DfEE, ibidem, 16). Since July 2000, Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) has been in the framework of Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE). PSHE includes nutrition and physical activity, drugs, alcohol and tobacco education, sex and relationships education, emotional health and wellbeing, safety, careers education, work-related learning, and personal finance.

In its 2003 second report, the Independent Advisory Group on Teenage Pregnancy recommended sex education lessons from the age of five, the age of compulsory education in the UK. And, one of the Social Exclusion Unit’s core recommendations was to extend sex education in primary schools. In 2008, rise in teen abortions prompted the ministers to ask schools to improve sex education for five year-olds being taught about relationships and older pupils about contraception and sex. But David Blunkett, Education secretary, backtracked for fear children would lose their innocence and in 2010 the project was dropped.

In the late 2009, Children’s Secretary Ed Balls announced that parents would no longer be able to remove teenagers over the age of fifteen from sex education classes in a plan to make Personal, Social and Health and Economic Education (PSHE) compulsory in all maintained schools. Thus, every underage secondary school pupil would receive sex education for a year, but the plan was abandoned in 2010 as Conservatives did not support his reforms since they think "children are children until they are 16, and after that they are adults" (BBC News, 2010). But even if sex education attendance was to become compulsory, students from academies and free schools would not have to follow the national curriculum (Brooks, op. cit.)

On 21 March 2011, Conservative MP Andrea Leadsom asked in the House of Commons: "Is my right hon. Friend aware of the great concern of some parents about the inappropriate material being shown to their five-year-old and seven-year-old children under the guise of Sex and Relationship Education? Will he take steps to start a licensing regime to ensure that the material being shown is age-appropriate?" (Parliament, 2011). She launched a campaign to support mothers with a view to review the sex education materials shown and used to primary school children exposed to too graphic description of sex in her constituency and suggested that the British Board of Film Classification take on classification of SRE materials.

On 4 May 2011, a bill was introduced by a Conservative MP to provide additional sex education for 13 to 16 year-old girls. It aims at providing information and advice on abstinence (Parliament, 2011). The government’s decision to make sex and relationship education compulsory in all primary and secondary schools from 2011 sparked controversy. The Schools Minister Nick Gibb held that the coalition
would not implement plans put forward under Labour to make sex education compulsory for children as young as five. From September 2011, sex education was to be taught as part of new lessons in Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE), but in fact the Coalition ditched the controversial plans and sex education remains optional in primary schools. Currently parents have the right to withdraw their children from sex education until they are 19, but the Opposition Shadow Minister under Labour, Ed Balls declared that the age of consent being 16, the voting age 18, it does not make sense for parents to control their children until 19. As recently as August 2012, David Paton concluded that school sex education has made little impact on teenage pregnancy rates (Paton, 2012, 22-24).

Conclusion

Scandinavian countries and West Germany seem to have been at the forefront of introducing sex education in school curricula (Sauerteig and Davidson, ibidem, 6), and openness on the issue of sexuality pays off. In Sweden, sex education has been compulsory since 1956 and for pupils it implies information on contraception and visits to family planning centres to lower rates of abortions. In Denmark, sex education has been compulsory from primary schools since 1970 and parental attempts to withdraw their child from these lessons have been rejected. Sex education in Holland is widespread although the subject is not compulsory in the curriculum but the government asks for the subject to be a priority. Dutch schools enjoy a lot of autonomy in terms of curriculum, but the government made the promotion of health compulsory within secondary schools where the subject is divided into two categories: biology and verzorging, that is to say hygiene and care, and half of the primary schools teach sexual and contraceptive issues (Valk, 2000). Schools work together with family planning clinics since the latter train teaching staff and advise them on school projects. Dutch teachers assume parents talked about sexuality with their children prior to teachers doing so at school (Van Loon, 2003, 57).

This is a far cry from Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) and British parents’ behaviour with respect to the communication with their children on sexual matters (Sunday Telegraph, 2012). In these countries, contrary to Great Britain, parents and carers of school children are not entitled to withdraw children from sex education classes (SEU, 1999, 124).

The success of sex education policies in the Netherlands and Scandinavia has curbed teenage conception rates and government-funded media campaigns have proven an educative tool to educate the general public notably to protect all from STIs and to make people aware of and loosen tongues on sexual abuse of children and young people. These countries consider that their success pertaining to low rates of teenage conceptions, HIV and STIs is linked to openness on sex education (Selman and Glendinning, 1996). In Great Britain, silence, censorship, allegedly based on fear, the fear of losing votes, of talking about sex, the fear of children losing their innocence, the fear of early sexual intercourse, of promiscuity, of homosexuality, of contamination contribute to the current rates of teenage parents, STDs, and to young people being infected with HIV or AIDS. Is it not time to break the silence which has been going on for the past centuries, when the sex life of British teenagers hits the headlines almost daily, and sex education in schools is still considered shockingly inadequate and a black hole? (Brooks, op. cit.)
Notes


2 Janet Whyte Chance (1885-1953) was a British birth control and abortion advocate.

3 Mary Whitehouse, born Constance Mary Hutcheson, (1910-2001) was a British moral crusader against the permissive society.

4 Mrs Victoria Gillick campaigned so that general practitioners would not be entitled to prescribe the pill to underage girls without the consent of their parents. Since then, general practitioners are tied by the Fraser and Scarman directives following the House of Lords decision in October 1985.

5 The clause was repealed in 2003.

6 Julia Frances, Baroness Cumberlege, Conservative peer.


8 Section 122 of the Local Government Act 2003.


10 […] we have seen that teachers believe that Dutch parents talk to their children about sex before they receive sex education in schools’.

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