RESEARCH REPORT 4

The education of 14-19 year-olds: Gender, sexuality and diversity in socio-cultural contexts

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October 2006
THE EDUCATION OF 14-19 YEAR-OLDS: GENDER, SEXUALITY AND DIVERSITY IN SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXTS

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Introduction

This essay provides a brief context for and commentary on Chapter 6 of the Nuffield Review entitled ‘The Education of 14-19 year olds’ and especially for section 2 on social and cultural dimensions. I offer some sociological evidence about New Labour (1997 – 2006) government discourses about how to achieve social and sexual/gender justice and educational or employment opportunities set within a changing socio-cultural context, especially around changing gender relations. I consider, first, social inclusion or exclusion in relation to gender, sex and sexuality and, second, educational standards and so-called ‘failing schools’ and the relatively new discourse of ‘failing boys’ (Epstein et al 1998; Arnot, David and Weiner 1999; Younger and Warrington 2005) that also relate to gender questions. This evidence, drawing largely on Alldred and David (in press), will also be set in the wider socio-cultural context in which views about young people and their economic, social and moral responsibilities have been changing from traditional gendered family roles, underpinned by social welfare policies (David 1980; 1993; 2003a) to ones about individual personal responsibilities or ‘personalization’ in the so-called ‘risk society’ (Beck, 1992; Beck et al 1996; Beck and Beck-Gersheim 2002). These socio-cultural ideas are linked to changing notions about evidence-based policies and practices and to changing lives within a global knowledge economy/society (Clegg and David 2006).

Thus I will argue that the aims of education in the twenty-first century have been radically transformed by social, political and economic changes in the last two decades (David 2003a; Arnot, David and Weiner 1999). In particular, values and views about gender roles within the family and economic life are now more heavily contested, with greater female involvement within labour markets and changes in family lives around types of relationships such as lone parent families (David 2003a). At the same time, there are increasing public anxieties fuelled by media attention about young people as sexual beings (see also Halstead and Reiss 2003). Historically, education was predicated upon the assumption of children as asexual and without a gender despite the fact that some aspects of school life were organised on gendered lines and
different roles for men and women in relation to family and employment were assumed and prescribed: housewife and full-time mother/carer versus male breadwinner\(^1\) (Arnot et al 1999; Land 1976; Paechter 1996).

**Government policies and discourses under New Labour**

When New Labour came to power in 1997 a new policy language and criteria for policy implementation around educational standards and opportunities especially for teenagers and young people aged 14 – 19 years old were developed. Whilst considerable attention has been paid to how New Labour changed policies with respect to secondary schools and parents or families, albeit with little attention to gender issues, rather less has been made of how policies with respect to social inclusion and social exclusion bore directly upon education policies and gender and sex matters. One of New Labour’s first moves was the setting up of the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) within the Cabinet Office (David et al 2002; David 2003b; Alldred and David in press; Tomlinson 2001) to develop and review policies on social disadvantage or deprivation. Levitas (1998) has usefully considered the values and three different discourses around social justice underpinning these policy developments.\(^2\)

Whilst the basic policy framework for both gender in schools and sex education was already in place, the New Labour government brought a new policy language to bear, drawing on the emergent audit and performativity culture: ‘Where the focus of debate had previously been on boundaries of authority between the state, professionals and the family, new terms began to dominate the policy agenda: social exclusion, targets and effectiveness’ (Thomson and Blake 2002, p.188).

The first annual report of the SEU (1999) was devoted to a consideration of the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (TPS) and the implications of school-age pregnancies for education around the use of the provocative phrase ‘teenage parenthood is bad for parents and for children’ (David 2003b). Although couched as about parenthood, the

\(^{1}\) Chapter 6 of the Nuffield Review is currently written as if education and schooling did not consider either the gender or sex of pupils. However, gender remains an organising principle of schooling with respect to certain subjects such as PE (Delamont 1990), and the whole pedagogical approach assumes gender relations (Paechter 2006) in respect to future roles within the family as mothers or fathers (David, 1980; David, Edwards, Hughes and Ribbens 1993). Historically, education has assumed different male and female roles in adulthood (Lewis 1986; Dyehouse 1986)

\(^{2}\) The three discourses are i. moral underclass debate (MUD), ii. radical economic redistribution (RED) and iii. social integration discourse (SID).
overarching emphasis and blame was clearly on young women and mothers’ responsibilities. Commissioned by the Prime Minister, Tony Blair’s values and his underlying concern with economics are apparent in his introduction to the report: ‘As a country, we can’t afford to continue to ignore this shameful record’, and ‘Our failure to tackle this problem has cost the teenagers, their children and the country dear’ and the role of education is clear in remedying the ‘fact’ that ‘too many teenage mothers – and fathers – simply fail to understand the price they, their children and society will pay’ (SEU 1999, p.4, our emphasis) (David 2003b; Alldred and David in press, C.3).

Amongst others, (Bullen, Hey and Kenway 2001; David 2003b; Levitas 1998) Thomson and Blake (2002, p.188) offer the TPS (SEU 1999) as the most vivid example of New Labour’s social exclusion agenda: ‘Teenage pregnancy is seen both as the result of social exclusion (occurring in deprived communities among young women who are educational underachievers) and as a central cause of social exclusion (associated with low birth weight and other negative social and health indicators)’. Thomson (1994) had shown the schism between health and education approaches to sex education in the past, but this time there was a cross departmental brief for ‘joined up’ government between the Department of Health and the Department for Education and Skills (/Employment (DfEE) as was then) (Alldred and David in press, Ch.1).

The SEU (1999) identified improving sex education as one strand of its TPS, and recommended that the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) survey sex and relationship education (Ofsted 2002, HMI 433). Within a year the Government had published new guidance for schools on Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) (DfEE 0116/2000 July 2000). The SEU’s report had also identified those LEAs in England with the highest conception rates among 15-17 year old girls, especially with the highest decile of school-age mothers (under 17 years of age) (David 2003b). The DfEE (now the DfES) allocated targeted monies from the School Standards fund to conduct what they called action research projects in schools to implement the strategy, and in particular the SRE guidance in those LEAs.

The national guidance on SRE (DfES 2000) is an important new initiative as it emphasises not only sex, but also relationships, as a basis for the new curriculum bringing in a social dimension, hitherto not a focus of attention within sex education guidance. Yet it retains a particular gender focus in that it states that (female) pupils should ‘learn the positive benefits to be gained by avoiding teenage pregnancy’ (Alldred and David in press, Ch.1). However, it also states that, given the wider
changing socio-cultural context, sex education now needs to specifically ‘engage boys’ (2000, p.11) and to this end, teachers are to plan ‘activities...matching their different learning styles’. Single sex groups are noted to be important particularly for pupils ‘from cultures where it is only acceptable to speak about the body in single sex groups’ (ibid, p.11). Thus, there is attention to the socio-cultural context and to issues around multi-culturalism.

The guidance has the status of ‘good practice’ and replaces Circular 5/94 (DfEE 0116/2000) taking into account the revised National Curriculum and ‘the need for guidance arising out of the new Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) framework’ (2000, p.3). This guidance describes three main elements of SRE: ‘Attitudes and values’, ‘Personal and social skills’ and ‘Knowledge and understanding’ (2000, p.5). It stipulates that each school’s policy must be available to parents/carers and must define SRE, describe who is responsible for it and how it will be provided, monitored and evaluated and provide information about parents’ right to withdraw their child (2000, p.7).

The division of the SRE curriculum into three elements allows values to be foregrounded (and named as a legitimate topic) in the first element (‘Attitudes and values’); frames as skills individual qualities such as ‘developing empathy’ and ‘managing emotions’ (perhaps an aspect of emotional intelligence, but a turn of phrase (‘managing’) that suggests keeping emotions in their place) in the second element (‘Personal and social skills’); and allows contentious statements to be presented as fact in the third element (‘Knowledge and understanding’). 3

Since then these recommendations have been incorporated into Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) along with the statutory requirement to develop Citizenship Education from 2003 (and forms of teacher education have been developed to support this latter work) (Halstead and Reiss 2003).

3 The first three of the five bullet points comprising this element are unsurprising, (although the explicit and pragmatic approach to sexual health service is new): ‘learning and understanding physical development at appropriate stages’; ‘understanding human sexuality, reproduction, sexual health, emotions and relationships’ and ‘learning about contraception and the range of local and national sexual health advice, contraception and support services’. However, the final two ‘Knowledge and understanding’ statements are: ‘learning the reasons for delaying sexual activity, and the benefits to be gained from such delay, and the avoidance of unplanned pregnancy.’ (2000 p.5). Not only is this rather one-sided (what about the reasons to have sex when ‘the time’ (and relationship) is right?) and rather labouring the point in emphasising that ‘benefits’ are ‘gains’, these opinion-laden statements are rendered ‘fact’ by their location in this section.(Alldred and David Ch.3, p.12).
Background policy discourses about family values and sex education

Sex education remains a contentious topic and can be described variously as a basic human right or as a corrupting influence on children’s ‘innocence’ (Mirza 2006; Monk 2000; Osler 2005). It has been the site of highly politicised struggles in the UK, *inter alia*, between central and local government, between right wing moral traditionalists and the liberal left, and between conservative moralists and health promoters (David, 1986; Durham 1991; Halstead and Reiss 2003; Monk 1998 Thomson 1994) and over the responsibilities of parents versus the state in relation to children (David, 1993; Packer 2000; Rose 1990).

The pupil as a ‘moral’ subject was formally raised in the 1986 Education Act which, in devolving control of sex education to school governing bodies, imposed the requirement to consult with parents (David 1987) and ‘most significantly […] established in primary legislation the requirement that sex education must be taught within a moral framework’ (Thomson 1994, p.48). It is required that sex education encourages pupils to ‘have due regard to moral considerations and the value of family life’ (1996 Education Act) (Monk 2001, p.274).

The 1993 Education Act made it compulsory for all state maintained secondary schools to provide sex education beyond the minimal amount (the biology of human fertilisation) that is covered in the National Science Curriculum (1999a/b) (Halstead and Reiss 2003). Control over school sex education policies had been taken from the Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and given to school governing bodies in 1986 (DES 1986; David 1986), but the 1993 Act required that school governors establish a written policy on their provision of sex education.

As a non statutory subject, the content of sex education is not specified by the National Curriculum, which prescribes for all the statutory subjects: hence the role of each school’s statement about their own provision. However, for the first time, the national framework in the form of Government ‘guidelines’ sets out what schools ought to cover with clear suggestions about how. The fact that governors and head-teachers ‘are required to have regard to this guidance (EA 1996)’ (Monk 2001, p.277) illustrates the more direct regulatory control of schools by Government which has resulted from the removal of LEA powers by recent Conservative and Labour governments.
The SEU report (1999) identified what it called ‘ignorance’ – ‘lack of accurate knowledge about contraception, STIs, what to expect in relationships and what it means to be a parent’ (1999, p.7) as one of the three causative explanations for the UK’s much lamented high teenage pregnancy rate relative to other western European countries (David 2003b). However, as Monk points out, the Learning and Skills Act 2000 actually required the Secretary of State to issue guidance to schools and furthermore, requires that this guidance ‘must secure that pupils (a) learn the nature of marriage and its importance for family life and the bringing up of children, and (b) are protected from teaching and materials which are inappropriate having regard to the age and the religious and cultural background of the pupils concerned (EA 1996 s 403 (IC))’ (Monk, 2001, p.276).

As Monk (ibid) goes on to argue: ‘In the privileging of marriage and by legitimising the perception and ‘moral panic’ that children need to be protected from inappropriate materials, these provisions clearly reflect the concerns of Baroness Young and her supporters in the House of Lords.’ These cross-party traditionalists wanted the reference to ‘other stable relationships’ in the original removed, because, they argued, this could be interpreted to mean that same-sex relationships were equivalent to marriage, which might ‘open the way for the promotion of homosexuality in schools’ (Baroness Young, Hansard 23/3/00, cited by Monk 2001, p.275). They got their way in a political trade-off that enabled Section 28 finally to be repealed in 2003.

However, the government used the guidance to make more nuanced statements although it still loads fear of the homosexual ‘other’ onto the discourse of the ‘erosion of family values’. Monk (2001) explains the political moves and layers of legislation that culminate in the current legal framework for sex education. Despite a significant shift in the treatment of homosexuality compared with its earlier treatment, political conflicts about homosexuality that have dominated recent UK debates about sex education echo loudly in this document.

New Labour values about sexual or gender justice, education and employment

The national guidance on SRE sets a very clear framework for schools to follow in the context of contested values about sex and family life (Halstead and Reiss 2003). Sex education is instrumental to the Government’s 2010 teenage pregnancy targets ‘to halve the rate of conceptions among under 18s’ and ‘increase the participation of teenage parents in education, training and work to reduce their risk of long-term social
exclusion’ (SEU 1999) (my emphasis). Delineating a concept like social exclusion allows the political work of constructing a problem in terms that imply precisely the ‘solutions’ one wishes to try (Alexiadou, 2002), as the teenage motherhood/sex education couplet illustrates well (David 2003b). One of the most significant changes brought by the 2000 Guidance is from prohibiting to promoting teachers’ provision of contraceptive advice to pupils in group and individual settings, alongside welcoming the involvement of health professionals and local health services. This is a welcome shift, but one which is clearly there to serve the teenage pregnancy agenda (Alldred and David in press, Ch.3, p.1-3).

The concern with moral issues is immediately apparent since the introduction (2000 p.3) refers to the need for SRE to be firmly rooted in the PSHE framework which seeks to help pupils deal with ‘difficult moral and social questions’ (ibid, p.3), ‘support young people through their physical, emotional and moral development’ (ibid, p.3), as they learn the ‘importance of values and individual conscience and moral considerations’ (ibid, p.5) in order that they ‘make responsible and well-informed decisions about their lives’. The repeated commitment to ‘moral’, yet unspecified, ‘values’ seems intended to reassure that sex will be taken out of the context of relationships and moral judgments (Alldred and David in press, Ch.3, p.6; Halstead and Reiss 2003).

The guidance clearly promotes particular values in its strongly directional statements on ‘the benefits of avoiding teenage pregnancy’ and about delaying sexual activity and avoiding under-age sex, the ‘responsibilities that sexual maturity brings’ and the importance of parents in ‘teaching their children about sex and relationships’ and maintaining the ‘ethos of the family’, and the SEU (1999)’s references to ‘shameful record on teenage pregnancy’ echo in the description of the 8000 conceptions to girls under 16 in 1998 as ‘clearly totally unacceptable’ (2000 p.15) (David 2003b).

The values embodied, such as the importance of the relationship-context for sex, and for the bearing and rearing of children, are a New Labour inflected version of family values (Alldred 1999; David 1993; 2003; Fox Harding 2000). Indeed many of these are its own explicit ‘value framework’. Values are also embedded implicitly in statements of apparent fact linking the health-risks of unprotected sex immediately to ‘greater dependence, undermining potential achievement in education and in further employment’ (2000, p.15) where Government agendas are apparent, yet not defended (Alldred and David in press, ch.3). In terms of being inclusive about the family, this is not as judgmental as Tory ‘family values’ were of those who do not (or could not, as in
same-sex couples) marry, but it falls short of the Sex Education Forum (SEF)’s ‘Values framework’ which states: ‘We note the diversity of family groups and settings in which children and young people live their lives’ (SEF 2003, p.4) (Alldred and David in press, Ch.3).

The SRE Guidance (2000) clearly presumes that all teenage pregnancy is unplanned, and all unplanned conception is unwanted. Whilst the majority of the document takes care to refer to ‘unplanned pregnancy’, nearer the end it refers to ‘unwanted pregnancy’, a phrase usually avoided today, which here perhaps conflates economic with subjective responses, the government’s with individuals’. Teenage pregnancy and parenthood are constructed as deviant, and even anti-social. The fraught nature of this document’s production is suggested by the constellation of sentences under ‘Relationships’ a few pages later:

‘Within the context of talking about relationships, children should be taught about the nature of marriage and its importance for family life and for bringing up children. The Government recognises that there are strong and mutually supportive relationships outside of marriage. Therefore, children should learn the significance of marriage and stable relationships as key building blocks of community and society. Teaching in this area needs to be sensitive so as not to stigmatise children on the basis of their home circumstances.’ (2000, p.11)

Cohabitation is to be respectfully acknowledged, but then reference to not stigmatising children (drawing implicitly on an unassailable children’s needs/self-esteem discourse) comes into play (Alldred and David in press, Ch.3).

The government wanted to ‘halve the rate of conceptions among under 18s by 2010, and to get more teenage parents into education, training or employment, to reduce their risk of long term social exclusion’ (SEU 1999, p.8). It is this work agenda that leads to the construction of teenage pregnancy as more of a problem of white young women in particular today. Sociological research has suggested that black (African Caribbean) mothers are more likely to combine paid work and mothering, whereas white mothers see paid work and mothering as incompatible or full-time motherhood as their ideal (Duncan and Edwards 1999; 2003) (Alldred and David in press, Ch.1).
The changing socio-economic contexts and women’s education and employment

What has changed, then, are both the official and government agendas about work and teenage motherhood and the wider socio-economic context in which women’s employment, whether single or in families with childcare responsibilities, has become the norm over the last 30 to 50 years. In general, women’s own expectations of employment have changed as generations of post-war women have been provided with educational (including higher education) and employment opportunities (Arnot, David and Weiner 1999). In particular what has changed dramatically is the intensification, under New Labour, of the individualisation of responsibility for financial security, and the deconstruction of the traditional social welfare system, moving towards what Beck (1992) and Giddens (1998) have described as the ’risk society’. Unlike under the post-war social democratic consensus, there are ‘no excuses’ for economic inactivity today – the expectation is that all adults, including mothers, and even lone parents are in paid work rather than supported through social welfare policies. The youngest of mothers usually have least to offer the labour market (perhaps not having finished compulsory schooling, taken exams or had work experience).

That the problematisation of teenage pregnancy is underpinned by social and political imperatives regarding the role of women (Bullen et al 2001, Wilson and Huntington 2005) is apparent in the SEU’s report, which makes multiple references to the cost of teenage parenthood to the young person, their child and the nation as in provocative phrases such as how ’bad’ teenage parenthood is and: ‘The UK cannot afford high rates of teenage conception and parenthood at the end of the twentieth century’ (SEU 1999, p.7) (Allred and David in press, Ch.1).

The demographics of childbirth are, however, changing, but the supposed bipolar pattern emerging is not borne out by recent national statistics (ONS accessed 30.05.06). In 2005 there were only 26.5 per thousand babies born to mothers under 20 (15-19), and 100.9 per thousand women born to mothers aged 30-34 overtaking the previous main group of women aged 25-29. There was, though, a continued rise in
the proportion of births outside marriages: 42.8 per cent in 2005, compared with 42.2 per cent in 2004. In 1995, 1 in 3 births were outside marriage.4

The key factor in making this a public issue is the characterisation of the two groups of mothers at the extremes as representing distinctly different class cultures with different education and employment trajectories. The ‘older’ mothers (25-34 year olds) typically have increasingly participated in further and/or higher education and been active in the labour market, whereas the younger mothers are seen as lacking educational capital and the potential to earn in order to support their children (David, 2003a). Early mothering compounds working-class women’s socio-economic disadvantage by increasing the risk of reliance on benefits, social housing and unemployment (Kiernan 1995; Botting et al 1998; Allen and Bourke-Dowling 1999, cited by McDermott and Graham 2005). Whether or not people avoid calling it class, there are stark differences between individuals and communities that are work-rich with women feeling they cannot step off the career ladder to have a baby (Bunting 2005) and the work-poor. As writers such as Phoenix (1990) have shown, in the public and policy debate about ‘young’ mothers, ‘new’ concerns re-circulate and overlay older themes. The relationships between education and employment endure as the YWCA’s report on teenage mothers also shows that such mothers are resistant to this (Harris et al 2005).

The SEU’s approach is to expect young mothers to engage in education and training for employment with funds that are released for, amongst other things, improving SRE and access to sexual health services, and for projects that engage young parents in education, employment or training (Harris et al 2005; Alldred and David in press). These will be evaluated strictly on the basis of their contribution to the agenda of reducing the teenage conception rate and getting existing young parents into (or closer to) gainful employment. The model of a socially desirable young person is clearly someone who prioritises education, and sees it as instrumental in gaining employment. The role of work in the model of the citizen means that women who are full-time mothering (and have little foothold on the employment ladder) are aberrant, and

4 The fertility rate for women aged 30-34 overtook that of women aged 25-29 in 2004. In 2005 this age group continued to have the highest fertility rate at 100.9 births per thousand women. The provisional standardised average (mean) age of women giving birth increased to 29.0 years, up from 28.9 in 2004. The unstandardised average (mean) age of women giving birth increased to 29.5 years up from 29.4 in 2004. www.ons.co.uk
worse still, ‘dependent’ on benefits. The changing social contract sees citizenship as
nigh conditional on participation in paid work (Alldred and David in press, Ch.1).

**New Labour values about social justice and opportunities**

New Labour seeks a middle path between left and right politics, in its ideological
rationale, *The Third Way* (Giddens 1998), which combines elements of left social
democracy and right neo-liberalism, creating, for McRobbie, ‘a managerialism of the
centre-left’ (2000, p.103). Designed to overcome the opposition between new right
individualism and the welfarist policies of the old left, it sees itself as pragmatically
drawing on ‘what works’ from both sides to integrate the oppositional principles of neo-
liberal economics and communitarian social policies (Franklin 2000; David 2003a).
Whereas traditional Labour Governments have been associated with developing and
bolstering the welfare state to protect people from the consequences of free market
capitalism, this ‘modernized’ Labour party deconstructs the welfare system (Hall 2003)
and creates new markets in the education system amongst other public services, and,
responsible only for curbing their ‘excesses’, unembarrassed by the profit-motive or
associated values. Individuals are to be helped to become self-reliant, where
necessary, the family or ‘community’ will support the needy. Whilst framed in terms of
individual freedoms, initiatives are easily translated back into the anti-welfarist
language of the previous Conservative Governments (McRobbie *ibid*).

Social justice is claimed to be part of the vision, but individual rights here entail
individual responsibilities and such expectations take no account of the ‘uneven playing
field’ from which individuals begin. Indeed drawing attention to disadvantage on the
basis of race, class, disability, sexuality or gender is perceived as divisive and old-
fashioned (Franklin 2000). Conflict is denied to create ‘a politics without adversaries’
(Hall 1998, p.10). Instead, the language of instrumentalism is to convince that
initiatives are rationally based on evidence from right and left policies that ‘worked’,
which is a supremely modernist ideal that the new learns from the mistakes of the old.
This reflects the ‘need for a cohesive and settled society, essential for social order and
economic efficiency’ where old arguments about inequalities could stir up discontent
(Franklin *ibid*, p.138).

Communitarian ideas are useful to New Labour in encouraging collective responsibility
over individual rights and autonomy, favouring the ‘common sense’ moral basis of
community life over liberal principles of justice and freedom (Franklin *ibid*). What the
‘communitarian turn’ (Jordan 1999) means in practice, though, is that two key principles of ‘old style’ social democracy are dropped: ‘a commitment to social and economic change and a recognition of the state’s role in tackling structural inequality’ (Franklin *ibid*, p.139). Consensus rather than *change* becomes the goal (and so dissent must be managed). *Individualistic* rather than *structural* solutions become the means:

‘By focusing on community and individual agency, where people in families and communities share responsibility with government agencies for social exclusion, there has been a tendency to disregard the significance of wider social and economic forces and the inequalities they produce. Individuals are encouraged to take the opportunities offered them by the Government and if they fail to do so, they become, in effect, responsible for their own inequality.’ (Franklin *ibid*, p.139).

**New Labour’s discourses and criteria about educational standards and gender**

Contemporary debates about education in the 1990s and into the twenty-first century have been preoccupied with ‘raising standards’, effective teaching, and ‘what works’ – reflecting a narrow agenda for schools, a narrow understanding of education and an impoverished model of the adolescent pupil as a result. The overarching concern promoted by education policy is for examination grades, hence the academic success of young people, as opposed to their personal and social development, their emotional well-being or their happiness. In particular, a key educational standard or benchmark has been set for 16 year olds as the passing of GCSE with 5 A*-C grades. This was also linked to the traditional so-called ‘gold standard’ of 3 GCE A levels for university entrance at 18 years old (Arnot, David and Weiner 1999).

The GCSE benchmark constitutes the New Labour performance criterion for not only individual pupils but also for assessing and inspecting schools as to whether or not they are ‘failing’ and in need of ‘special measures’ or special attention. Schools that fall below having 20 percent of pupils passing 5 A*-C GCSEs may merit ‘special measures’ and be deemed to be ‘failing’.

However, this criterion is not *gender neutral* and the proportion of boys achieving these grades has been over ten percent less than girls since this was set as a criterion in 1995 (Younger and Warrington 2005 p.33). Until the 1990s, there was very little evidence about the differential educational successes and achievements of boys and girls despite the fact that, since the 1970s, feminist and other social scientists had
been providing and advocating research into gender and education (Arnot, David and Weiner 1999). *Closing the Gender Gap* (*ibid*) identified gender differences at both GCSE and A level and presented evidence about how the socio-economic transformations had contributed to these educational changes. Nevertheless, Arnot et al (1999)’s evidence was more complex with gender differences within and across subjects especially for the more academically able. At GCE A level, some traditional subjects such as Maths and Physics remain a male preserve, and others such as Modern Foreign Languages more female. It also was a nuanced account that situated the evidence in a wider socio-cultural context about changing forms of gender relations, and views of masculinities and femininities in the family, school and work force, or changing public-private relations.

Younger and Warrington (2005) summarise, however, the evidence and arguments about GCSEs and changing gender relations at the beginning of the twenty-first century as follows:

A three year rolling mean figure for England over the period 1997-9 shows that 51.6 per cent of girls and 41.5 per cent of boys achieved the benchmark grades (10.1 percentage points difference); by 2004, the gender gap was virtually unchanged, with the benchmark grades being achieved by 58.5 per cent of girls and 48.4 per cent of boys (DfES 2004e). Notably, however, this gender gap continues to exist against a background of rising levels of academic achievement of both boys and girls, although this aspect of the national performance profile has been relatively unrecognised and uncelebrated by most commentators... It is clear also that at the lowest levels of attainment in GCSE terms, there is little evidence of a substantial gender gap; in 2004, for example, 96.6 per cent of girls and 94.9 per cent of boys achieved at least 1 A*-G GCSE grade or the GNVQ equivalent (DfES 2004e)... The other aspect of the gender gap at the end of compulsory schooling which has become more stark through time, however, has been one based upon an analysis of students’ performances in different subjects...Those subjects perceived traditionally as boys’ subjects, subjects such as Mathematics, Science, Design and Technology, Information Technology, have been colonized by girls with increasing success, whereas boys have failed to engage to a similar degree with traditional girls’ subjects such as the Humanities and Modern Languages. Thus, in 2004, as in every preceding year of the century, girls out-perform boys in virtually every mainstream subject of the National Curriculum. This is apparent not only at the level of the benchmark grades, but also at the highest level of
achievement at GCSE (i.e. at A* and A grade), in all subjects except for Mathematics. (Younger and Warrington 2005, p.32-33).

In 2006 the DfES revised the benchmark criteria of GCSEs to ensure that Mathematics and English are included within the 5 GCSEs as constituting the key. At the same time, however, this pre-occupation with the particular GCSE benchmark for schools has apparently shifted slightly, in that a new agenda of personalisation, linked with choice, has emerged onto official and government agendas.

However, this is not the same personalisation as in Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE), but rather a new twenty-first century term for individualisation following Beck and Giddens (1996), and it is linked with the revised and re-invigorated choice agenda, re-asserting schools’ right to choose their own values and ethos (Alldred and David in press, Ch.1).

The issue of school agendas in the context of shifting government initiatives (so-called initiative overload) and priorities for education is thus central to how schools balance competing demands for subjects in the national curriculum versus personal, social and health matters. The significance of the achievement agenda and the increasing pressure this, and the marketisation of education (Ball 2003), place on schools is critical. Competition between schools – which is reflected in competition between the league table status ‘academic’ subjects and the lower status personal and social education – obstructs the delivery of good sex and relationship education. The immense pressure on young people to perform academically distracts from the important issues of their personal, political, emotional and sexual development.

A more specifically educational discourse of gender is evident too, but it is narrowly related to issues of sex and sexuality rather than the question of broader curricula and pedagogical issues. Pupils are gendered primarily in relation to a relatively newly perceived set of needs that schools ought to attend. The ‘feminisation of schooling’ is held to have resulted in boys being failed by schools - the ‘failing schools, failing boys’ discourse identified by Epstein et al (1998) and elaborated by Arnot et al (1999).

A general discursive shift in popular debate (Alldred and David in press, Ch.2) reframes gender equity concerns as for boys’ achievement (Epstein et al ibid; Younger and Warrington 2005). Whereas this inversion can be interpreted as a form of backlash to earlier feminist promotion of girls’ educational opportunities (Arnot et al 1999), here
it has a more feminist flavour because of its challenge to the historical responsibility heterosexual women have carried for childrearing and contraception.

Many of the issues raised by Epstein and Johnson back in the 1990s remain problematic and even rhetorical inclusion in SRE policy does not solve them. Despite the attempt to construct a genuinely spiral curriculum that delivers age-appropriate SRE at each ‘key stage’ of schooling to support their physical and emotional maturation, the TPS agenda’s incorporation of SRE is such that it retains the earlier focus of earlier programmes on young people as they become sexually active as opposed to viewing sexuality as an integral part of personhood throughout childhood (Thomson and Blake 2002) (Alldred and David in press, Ch. 3, p.31).

**Socio-cultural issues in relation to young people’s sexuality and gender**

By 2006 research on gender, sexuality and schooling has provided us with a vast array of knowledge not just about educational success and achievements but also about the informal and unofficial curriculum of the school and boys’ and girls’ social and personal relationships (Hey 1996). We know that there are very different cultures in different school and educational settings, but that gender and sexuality are not absent from any of these contexts. Yet these are only partially acknowledged in official reports and studies. However, Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001) have shown the different dilemmas for young women ‘growing up girl’ as their title suggests in a neo-liberal culture. Contrast this with Frosh, Pattman and Phoenix’s (2002) study of adolescent boys from ethnic and racially diverse backgrounds during a similar period of change.

Equally there is plenty of evidence about how the informal curriculum or culture of schools operates on a gendered and sexualised basis. For example, despite the denying and sanitizing of young people’s sexuality from the official culture of the school, recent studies in schools by Mary Jane Kehily and others (eg with Nayak, 2006; Youdell, 2006) have shown that they are in fact very sexualised spaces:

‘Researchers in this field have commented on the ways in which informal school-based cultures are saturated with sex – through humour, innuendo, double-entendre and explicit commentary – yet the official culture of the school frequently seeks to deny the sexual and desexualize schooling relations (Epstein and Johnson 1998; Jackson 1982)’ (Kehily 2002, p5).
David and Alldred (2006) have also provided evidence of what the 125 boys and girls as pupils aged 13 – 14 in Year 8 or 9 interviewed think about the kinds of curricula on offer to them on personal, social and health matters. Almost invariably these young people wanted only to have ‘information’ about health and sexual matters, rather than be engaged in more intensive debates and discussions to learn about intimate and personal matters. In line with the current cultures of school, for the most part they wanted these sessions in single sex classes to avoid the sexual banter that mixed classes inevitably invoked. This was particularly true of the girls we questioned, in line with the existing literature on young women which demonstrates how they are willing to talk about these matters in peer groups, with friends and family. Thus girls would opt for single sex classes, as would the group of Asian boys that we happened to talk with, confirming the issues raised about social diversity and multiculturalism. Most boys did not mind the mixed classroom, if they were willing to talk about these issues, which they mostly were not.

When asked about preferences for talking about sexual matters and relationships friends and mothers were most frequently cited, especially by the girls, whereas boys sometimes mentioned their fathers, also confirming the gendered nature of familial relationships. When it came to school-based matters, school nurses, inevitably female, were hugely preferred over teachers for these kinds of matters, again overwhelmingly so by girls. Boys saw these nurses as more professional and information giving than teachers, and also they were more distant figures, with whom a school relationship would not apply.

This kind of evidence about how teenage boys and girls in twenty-first century England feel about the more general public and media anxieties about sex, sexuality and sexual orientation confirms both continuity and change in normative expectations about what it is to be growing up as male or female at this juncture. It is clear that there are needs for sensitive, caring and careful information about changing relationships to help teenage boys and girls with their emergent social and sexual identities. However, given that the teachers also had anxieties and misinformation about how to convey this kind of information and teach about sex and sexuality, it is little wonder that these are full of ambiguity and tension.

Both the YWCA study of teenage mothers (Harris et al 2005) and the David and Alldred (in press) study also found that these young women had not had happy and good experiences of school and had felt bullied and disrespected by their teachers and this
gave them ambivalent feelings about the benefits of education. However, both studies found that the young mothers were not resistant to education or training, but in the future, not whilst they had their babies and very young children. They wanted such education for themselves and for their children. Some of them were in part-time education and training projects and had been found by educational means, viz. through the Schools Re-integration Officer. Giving good accounts of their lives was a pressure that they might have felt strongly, given this orientation.

Most importantly, the young mothers in both studies (Harris et al ibid and Alldred and David ibid) did not feel that their experiences and expectations were out of the ordinary, but rather confirmed their family cultures and values. Mostly their mothers and siblings (whether brothers or sisters) had had children young and as teenagers, and were following a family pattern rather than diverging from normative expectations. Thus for these small groups of women the pattern of early child-bearing is part of a particular working class poor community in socially disadvantaged areas and communities.

SRE, as designed by the government through its TPS, may go some way to dealing with raising the status of these issues, but it does not grapple with the wider and enduring socio-cultural and economic contexts, with their heavily gendered forms, within which such questions are deeply embedded. It also does not address the question of emotions and feelings about intimate and more public relations with which these issues are inevitably entwined.

**Conclusions**

New Labour educational policies are clearly set in a changing political and socio-cultural context, with changing views and values about young men and women as individuals and their personal responsibilities for themselves and families. These clearly respond to a radically altered global economic context in which women and men work, and are increasingly expected to work, whether or not they have family roles and responsibilities for child rearing. Yet these views and values often clash with traditional cultures in which generations of women as mothers have not expected to work when their children are young or even of school-age. These may be local and class or faith-based but they may also cross social class boundaries, with many middle class women assuming that they should spend time at home raising and rearing their children and supporting the school through parental involvement.
Most importantly, whilst the New Labour government has been addressing the question of sex and relationships through their policies for SRE, these have not fully engaged with deeper questions of gender and sexual identities and related issues of feelings and emotions. Whilst recently, a public debate has been sparked about ‘happiness’ and mental health issues by Layard (2005) these have not been incorporated into debates about educational policies and sex or relationships.

The evidence that I have reviewed in this short paper suggests that the notion of ‘the educated 19 year old’ could only be fully addressed by giving more detailed consideration to the changing socio-cultural contexts that mesh with/entwine or intertwine with policy debates/discourses about gender and sexuality and questions of feelings and emotions.

References


