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## **Sex Education Materials in The Netherlands and in England and Wales: a comparison of content, use and teaching practice**

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JANE LEWIS & TRUDIE KNIJN

*ABSTRACT* Sex education in The Netherlands and in the UK [1] has attracted attention because of the huge differences between the teenage pregnancy rates. There are substantial similarities in the way in which sex education is structured in the two countries, and yet the approach to the subject is very different. We used documentary sources and interviews to explore the political debates; compared both science and PSE texts aimed at 14–15-year-olds; and carried out exploratory field work in three secondary schools in each country. While sex education is controversial in both countries, the British debate is adversarial and the Dutch strive to seek consensus, making use of professional sex educators in the process. The difference in approach is reflected in both the sex education materials and the approach taken in the classroom. We conclude that the Dutch are significantly more successful in addressing the problem of ignorance and of promoting a coherent sex education message.

### INTRODUCTION

The UK is usually contrasted with The Netherlands in regard to the huge difference in teenage pregnancy rates between the two countries. During the last quarter of the twentieth century, the birth rate per 1000 girls aged 15–19 in England and Wales remained remarkably stable at just above or below 40, while that for Dutch girls of the same age halved from an already low 8.4 to 4.1. The formal provision of sex education in schools is widely recognised to be only one of a number of factors that influence teenage pregnancy rates. The recent Report on the subject published by the UK Government's Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) concluded that there were three main reasons for the high teenage birth rate in England [2]: low expectations among young women who 'see no prospect of a job and fear they will end up on benefit one way or the other'; ignorance about contraception, sexually transmitted infections, what to expect in relationships and what it means to be a parent; and 'mixed messages' about sex and sexual activity which result not in less sex but in less protected sex (Cm. 4342, 1999, p. 7). The first of these causes draws attention to the much greater social polarities that exist in the UK than in any other Western European country (Hills, 1998); indeed, low expectations may also play a role in explaining the teenage pregnancy rate of black women in Amsterdam, which is much closer to the average for Britain. Formal sex education plays a part in addressing the second and third causes of teenage pregnancy suggested by the SEU, although the role of the media and of parents, who are known to play a far more active part in sex education in The

Netherlands than in Britain (Allen, 1987; Nyman, 1993; Scott *et al.*, 1995; Ravesloot, 1997; Balding, 1999; Schalet, 2000; [www.maristopes.org.uk/msi\\_pr\\_sexplanations\\_campaign.html](http://www.maristopes.org.uk/msi_pr_sexplanations_campaign.html), 7.11.00), may be as or more important [3].

Sex education in schools is a good point of comparison between the two countries because there are substantial similarities in the time devoted to it and in the way in which it is structured. Indeed, it is one area in which Dutch practice has not been notably in advance of that in the UK in the recent past. The influential Guttmacher Institute study of teenage pregnancy in industrialised countries commented on the resistance of conservative religious groups in The Netherlands to sex education in schools (Jones *et al.*, 1986, p. 173), and a group of British observers in the mid-1990s were surprised that Dutch sex education was not more extensive (Scott *et al.*, 1995, p. 21). The teaching of sex education is structured in similar ways in the two countries, with a division between biology and personal and social education (known as 'care' in The Netherlands), although 'care' has been compulsory since 1993, whereas PSE is not. There is also substantial overlap in content and in methods between the materials used in both countries. Indeed, a leading sex educator in the Rutgers *Stichting* (Rutgers Foundation, the main organisation providing materials for sex education in schools), reported that Dutch sex educators have often found the materials developed by their British counterparts closer in approach than most of those produced by their other European neighbours [4]. However, the materials produced by professional sex educators such as those employed by the Rutgers *Stichting* are integrated into the Dutch curriculum in a way that comparable material from the British Family Planning Association is not. In England, there is in practice a far sharper division between the materials used in science lessons, in personal and social education, and for home reading.

The most important point of difference between the two countries relates to the context for the delivery of sex education rather than to the education system or the organisation of sex education. As our informant from the Rutgers *Stichting* commented, differences may lie as much in how the subject is approached, as in the structure of sex education. This respondent, in common with many other observers of Dutch practices in respect of sex education, stressed the importance of the broad cultural context. In particular, Dutch society is much more open to the discussion of sex and sexuality (Jones, *et al.*, 1986; Doppenberg, 1991; Ketting, 1994; Braeken, 1994), although not necessarily more permissive, as many English-speaking observers have assumed (e.g. Dryfoos, 1990; Hardy & Zabin, 1991). In the UK, these issues are more controversial, especially at the level of political debate and legislation (David, 1983), and as Selman's (2000) study of the media and government policies has shown, messages are indeed more likely to be mixed.

We explore the differences in context for the two countries, using the political debates over sex education. This is a story of absence in the Dutch case, where the approach to policy making in this, as in other divisive arenas in a country that is 'pillarised' between Catholic and protestant faiths, is to seek agreement. In particular, professionals in the field are given the task of building consensus. In the UK, the story is an adversarial one involving MPs, peers and pressure groups. The second substantive part of the paper examines the differences in the materials used in the classroom, in both countries and comments on their use on the basis of a small exploratory study of English and Dutch schools. We examine the aims and philosophy of sex education and the approaches to it revealed by the materials used in the two countries, and locate these in the wider context of the very different approaches taken by policy-makers in the

two countries. The value of comparing the English position with the Dutch is not to seek explicitly to 'borrow' from the Dutch, but rather to better understand the nature of the controversies and difficulties experienced in the English case. We suggest that the extent to which the English materials fail to address the problem of ignorance and fail to promote a coherent message is significant compared to what happens in The Netherlands.

## THE STUDY

Researchers in England and The Netherlands used documentary sources and interviews to investigate the recent history of policy-making on sex education at the level of central government during the 1980s and 1990s: Parliamentary debates; the records (published and unpublished) of major pressure groups [5]; and interviews with key informants. Major Parliamentary debates took place in the UK in 1986, 1993 and 1999/2000. In contrast, sex education was never discussed in the Dutch *Parlement* during the 1980s and 1990s, and interviews with leading sex educators were used to establish the way in which decisions on the nature of sex education were reached. In the course of the lengthy UK confrontations, the 'traditionalist' opposition to sex education in and outside Parliament tended to focus on particular books that were considered to support its case. These were examined in relation to a sample of other texts, which did not attract the attention of the traditionalists, and in the context of the wider political debate in order to probe the basis for opposition. No Dutch text evoked any controversy.

Samples of science texts and PSE/'care' materials aimed at 14–15-year-olds were selected to represent different types of courses and different educational publishers and compared for both countries (key passages of the Dutch texts were translated). A total of ten English and six Dutch science texts together with six English and six Dutch PSE/'care' texts were examined. A small sample of five English books intended primarily for home reading or libraries, which proved the most controversial in the course of the Parliamentary debates, were also examined. Some of the most controversial English PSE and home reading materials were aimed at younger children. Primary schools in England and Wales are legally obliged to teach some 'biological' aspects of sex education, but there is no strong programme of explicit sex education as in The Netherlands, where 'attainment targets' were set for the subject in primary schools in 1985.

The researchers also carried out exploratory fieldwork in secondary schools. For England, classes were observed and teachers interviewed in three schools in a London borough and one school in an East Midlands provincial town. Negotiating access with schools proved difficult, possibly because of the extent to which the subject of sex education was again politicised in the UK during 1999/2000, the period of the fieldwork. In the London borough, where boys and girls are educated separately, no boys' school was prepared to co-operate with the researchers. In the light of the findings from the other, mixed schools in respect of the behaviour of boys during sex education lessons, this may be significant. In addition, the delivery of special sex education programmes was observed on a one-off basis in three further schools, in the East Midlands provincial town, in a West Midlands provincial town, and in Surrey [6]. In The Netherlands, classes were also observed and teachers interviewed in three schools: in The Hague, in Nieuwegein (a town near Utrecht) and Utrecht.

## THE POLITICAL DEBATE OVER SEX EDUCATION

The political controversy over sex education in the UK has been huge and is incomprehensible from the Dutch perspective. As a result of the 1986 UK debate over sex education, an Education Act was passed which stated that sex education must be taught within a 'moral framework', and control of what happened in schools passed from locally elected authorities to school governors. In 1988, a Local Government Act (commonly referred to as 'Section 28') forbade any local education authority from 'promoting' homosexuality in schools, although it should be noted that by this time sex education was in fact the responsibility of governing bodies. In 1993, another Education Act made biological reproduction a compulsory part of the curriculum in secondary schools, but removed from it all 'non-biological' aspects, including discussion of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS. These were moved into (non-compulsory) sex education for senior pupils. During 1999/2000, the Parliamentary debates over the repeal of Section 28 and over a new Learning and Skills Bill were more intense than ever before, covering more pages in Hansard than they had done in either 1986 or 1993. The results were a failure to remove Section 28 from the Statute Books, together with, for the first time, rules debarring 'inappropriate' sex education materials from the classroom and an insistence that schools refer to the importance of marriage in sex education. The main charges made against sex education over the period 1986–2000 by traditionalist Parliamentarians (who were mainly, but not exclusively Conservative) and by pressure groups were that:

- sex education portrays homosexuality incorrectly;
- sex education is a symptom/cause of moral decline;
- sex education does not promote marriage as it should;
- the imagery used in sex education resources is too explicit;
- the sex practices described in sex education are depraved.

It is important to note that when the term 'sex education' was used in the debates it referred almost exclusively to printed sex education materials. No reference was made to video materials or other vehicles for delivering sex education, such as theatre groups, nor was any evidence cited as to how printed materials were actually used. In interview, Peter Bruinvels MP, one of the key critics of 'corrupting' resources in the 1980s, dismissed videos as ephemera, whereas books were continually available in libraries and carried 'a danger of absolute corruption' [7].

In the course of the Parliamentary Debates of 1986, 1988 and 1993, 25 sex education publications were denounced. The two most commonly mentioned dealt with issues of homosexuality:

- Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin* (Bosche, 1983), 7 references [8]
- The Milkman's on his Way* (Rees, 1982) 5 references [9]

Indeed, homosexuality was central to the debates over sex education in 1986 (in relation to alleged pro-gay lessons in schools), in 1988 (in relation to Section 28), in 1993 (in relation to HIV/AIDS education), and again in 1999/2000 with the effort to repeal Section 28, when the spectre of *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin* (originally published in Denmark, where it was apparently uncontroversial) was invoked again alongside other more recent materials that included role plays involving homosexuality [10]. Both *Jenny Lives ...* and *The Milkman ...* may be classified as books for private reading rather than classroom materials. A copy of *Jenny Lives ...* was apparently found

in a teacher's room at an Inner London Education Authority Centre in the mid-1980s, but there is no evidence that these books were regularly used in classrooms.

However, biology texts and PSE materials were also denounced in Parliament. Roberts's *Biology for Life* (1981) was the only book in our sample of English science texts to treat the issue of homosexuality and was explicitly condemned for so doing in the 1986 House of Commons Debate [11]. It was also condemned for treating abortion, which was covered by one other text, and contraception, which was covered by eight books. Despite being very similar to the other science texts, particularly in its treatment of sexual intercourse and contraception, *Biology for Life* remains unusual to this day in mentioning masturbation, abortion and homosexuality at all. However, as with his treatment of teenage relationships, Roberts's treatment of homosexuality is relatively conservative:

Such relationships ... are not usually permanent or harmful ... There is nothing wrong with being a homosexual, though a great deal of harm is sometimes done by the feelings of guilt and isolation which may accompany it. If a person finds that he or she has homosexual feelings and is worried about it, it is better to talk it over with parents, a counsellor or a trusted friend than to bottle it up. (Roberts, 1981, p. 315)

This passage is likely to offend liberals as well as traditionalists. Indeed it seems that it was the very fact that homosexuality is mentioned in the text, rather than the way in which it is treated, that caused the controversy. The treatment of *Biology for Life* further suggests the extent to which criticisms of school sex education are rooted in hostility towards homosexuality in the UK.

The PSE course materials singled out for attack were *Taught not Caught* (Clarity Collective, 1983), *Knowing Me Knowing You* (Sanders & Swinden, 1994), and *The Primary School Workbook* (Lenderyou, 1994). The last two are intended exclusively for use with children of primary school age, and the first also features numerous exercises for small children. Daniel Monk (1998) has suggested that much of the confusion over sex education policy has arisen from an insistence that children are asexual beings whose innocence must be protected. This chimes with the traditionalist politician's approach to sex education and deep-seated belief in childhood innocence. For example, Baroness Strange, speaking in the Parliamentary debate on the proposal to repeal Section 28 early in 2000 said: 'Yesterday, when I was kneeling in the snowdrops in the woods at home, picking fresh white blossoms with their sharp, sweet scent, they made me think of the innocence, purity and loveliness of children, of their fresh clear eyes and their direct way of looking at things' [12].

Lord Pearson criticised *Knowing Me Knowing You* in the 1993 Parliamentary Debates: 'It reveals that there is an element, perhaps a strong element in our teaching fraternity, that wishes to discuss some aspects of sex education with children whose age indicates that they may not be ready for them' [13]. The *Primary School Workbook*, written by Jill Lenderyou of the FPA after consultation with sixty primary schools [14], was attacked by Barbara Amiel in the *Sunday Times*, by Olga Maitland and John Patten (Secretary of State for Education) in Parliament, by the traditionalist pressure group Family and Youth Concern, and by the Catholic Education Service [15]. *Taught not Caught* was attacked in the 1986 Parliamentary Debates by Viscount Buckmaster, who saw the book as an example of all that was wrong with modern amoral, pro-homosexual sex education:

[A] great deal of the sex education today, particularly in our maintained

schools, is amoral, if not downright immoral, dealing as it does with human reproduction in the most provocative and explicit way with no element of moral guidance. Indeed, the theme running through most of this literature is that sexual activity among teenagers of whatever age is quite normal and natural ... In 'Taught not Caught', there is a series of [lessons] in which various methods are used to persuade children that there are no rights or wrongs, that they must make up their own minds about who they have sex with and when, and that parents are oppressors to be circumvented. There is an almost obsessional theme running through the book to persuade young people to regard homosexual relationships as being in every way as acceptable as others. [16]

This passage captures most of the main criticisms levied by traditionalists against sex education in schools.

It is difficult to know how particular books achieved pariah status. Sometimes it seems that either the books had not been read by their critics, or that they were deliberately misrepresented. In the case of *The Milkman's on his Way*, criticism in Parliament focused on the explicit sex scenes, which are a small part of the book and exist to bolster the plot, rather than the plot existing simply as a vehicle for the sex scenes. Politicians referred particularly to the 'buggery on a beach' scene, yet this is a misreading; no intercourse takes place in that particular scene. It is possible that critics of the book were drawing on Rachel Tingle's *Gay Lessons* (1996), a self-styled exposé of 'gay-promoting lessons', in which the factual error occurs. It is noteworthy that a text designed to counter homophobia as part of classroom teaching on Personal and Social Education also openly suggested that homosexuality is 'perfectly natural. As in all areas of human activity, people want to make rules about sexuality. The truth is, there are no rules' (Mole, 1995, p. 103), and yet escaped criticism, despite being published by Camden and Islington Community Health Services NHS Trust and listed in the Health Education Authority's list of recommended teaching materials for 1999. Traditionalist criticism of sex education materials has been fierce, but erratic.

Underlying the traditionalists' criticism of particular sex education materials is a view that 'the law has a declarative function' [17], and that there are certain agreed 'family values' that should be promoted, hence the fierce opposition to the promotion of homosexuality and the inclusion of 'morality clauses' in the 1986 and 2000 legislation. The 1986 Act bade local education authorities and school governors ensure that sex education was delivered with 'due regard to moral considerations and the value of family life'. In the course of the Parliamentary Debate over the 2000 Learning and Skills Act, a clause that referred to teaching the importance of 'stable relationships' was replaced by one that referred to 'marriage', at the insistence of traditionalists. Indeed, in interview a leading traditionalist peer, Baroness Young, linked the low rate of Dutch teenage pregnancy to the low Dutch divorce rate [18].

However, Dutch policy makers have accepted the rapid changes in sexual behaviour and in family form that have involved first, the separation of sex and marriage and most recently the increasing separation of marriage and parenthood (Schoon, 1996). They have also endeavoured to address the issues raised by these changes by taking what is termed 'the plurality of lifestyles' for granted. British traditionalists have been more concerned to attack what they view as the major threats to the traditional family: homosexuality, the decline of marriage and sex outside marriage, particularly among teenagers. Whereas Dutch politicians (and parents) have accepted the fact of teenage

sexual activity (Ravesloot, 1997; Kolker, 1999), their British counterparts have not (Thomson, 1994) and at the extreme believe that sex education is a cause of greater teenage sexual activity [19], something that recent research has rejected (Wellings *et al.*, 1994; Mellanby *et al.*, 1995). The fundamental nature of the disagreement between traditionalists and liberals in the UK has resulted in an adversarial politics that percolates through lobby groups and affects the content of sex education materials and classroom practice. There has also been opposition in The Netherlands to sex education from small Christian Parties, particularly to provision in primary schools [20]. However, while British politicians have sought to legislate what sex education practice should be, Dutch politicians have handed over what is also a difficult area in a religiously divided country to the professional staff employed by the ‘pillarised’ voluntary organisations, in order that they might seek consensus [21]. This has only been possible because there is agreement that ways must be found to address the fundamental changes that have taken place within the family. The Dutch approach is not *laissez-faire* and permissive, but rather pragmatic; it is part of the job of civil society rather than of politicians to come to decisions on issues that directly affect people’s lifestyles. In contrast, British policy-makers have not even been able to agree on the issue to be addressed, which has resulted in confused aims and a lack of coherence in respect of the sex education that is delivered.

## COMPARING DUTCH AND BRITISH SECONDARY SCHOOL MATERIALS

### *Science Materials* [22]

Compared to their Dutch counterparts, British science texts are both conservative and negative in their treatment of sex, even though it is perfectly legal at age 16. Indeed most of the texts in our sample were for GCSE students who would turn 16 during the course. No British textbook printed photographs of naked men or women. Genitalia are presented in the manner of a medical text. *Biology for Life* was one of six books providing a visual representation of sexual intercourse, but in all the diagrams the couple are shown from waist to mid-thigh only. In most they appear with one leg each, as if they had been cut right down the middle, while in others the legs are ghosted (see-through) to give an indication as to how they are positioned during sex. Most cross-sections label the anatomical parts with arrows to indicate the flow of sperm from the testes to the oviducts. Some of the diagrams are curious. Roberts and Mawby (1991), for example, show the man’s penis inside the woman’s vagina, but there appears to be no skin contact between the couple, with the man’s testes and abdomen several inches away from his partner. In common with the other books in the sample, the book depicts only the ‘missionary position’. Most Dutch science books have full colour pictures of naked men and women and provide more of a ‘user’s guide’ to bodies, with information about hygiene and what organs will look and feel like when they are developed.

Unlike the Dutch books, the British texts refrain from mentioning female sexual arousal and most are coy about discussing sexual pleasure. Reiss’s (1998) examination of 15 GCSE science books, three of which are also in our sample, criticised their sexism (for example, only five books mentioned the clitoris at all), and the omission of anything to do with homosexuality. Dutch science books treat female sexual arousal in straightforward terms: ‘during intercourse the clitoris is almost never stimulated so strongly that the woman comes’ (Akkerman *et al.*, 2000, p. 87) and describe how to achieve an orgasm by masturbation.



All the British texts depict sex as existing primarily for procreation; eight give no other reason for it at all and do not mention love or affection. Contraception is covered by eight books, but is difficult to discuss in the absence of any social or personal context being given for sexual intercourse. There are large differences in the extent to which texts concede that information is or might be relevant to pupils. Smallman's (1987) text advises that contraception should be chosen carefully, but only describes the IUD and the cap, ignoring the methods most used by young people. Beckett and Gallagher (1989) explain how the pill works but stress its dangers, including the possibility that users may develop breast cancer. The Dutch science texts provide full coverage of methods of contraception, discuss where they can be obtained and why some are suitable for certain groups of people.

Only four British books discuss the emotional changes that occur at puberty and in adolescence and *Biology for Life* stands out in making some reference, however implicit, to teenage relationships. However, the author's approach seems to be highly conservative. The book carries two exercises, which implicitly address the issue of teenage sex. In the first, pupils are asked to study a graph comparing the rates of growth of the brain, the body in general and the reproductive organs. The graph shows that only at age 20 do all three lines on the graph meet. The implication is that it is wrong to use the sex organs before 20 when the brain is fully developed (Roberts, 1981, p. 299, Q. 5). The second exercise seems rather out of place in a biology text. Pupils are asked to comment on a graph showing the steep rise in teenage pregnancies in the UK from 1948 to 1968: 'Suggest reasons why there has been a steady rise in the number of pregnancies during this time' (Roberts, 1981, p. 315). This is not a medical question because teenage pregnancy is a complex social phenomenon, and it is not clear what pupils are meant to write in response. Only Williams (1996) discusses human relationships without including an implied condemnation of teenage sex. This is also the only book to feature a romantic image: the human reproduction chapter concludes with a photograph of a couple holding hands on a beach, silhouetted against the sunset. The text says:

A close physical relationship is important to most couples. But it should also be part of a loving, caring relationship. You should be old enough to take responsibility for the actions and feelings of both yourself and your partner. This means not doing anything to harm your partner either physically or emotionally. A relationship that fully respects the feelings of both partners is one that has the best chance of lasting. (Williams, 1996, p. 158)

The passage is not prescriptive; it does not specify an age at which a physical relationship is appropriate. However, it does seek to explain in what context sex should take place, and the responsibilities that are associated with it. Williams is the exception. All other references to teenage sex are negative.

In contrast, the Dutch texts invariably contain romantic images of couples kissing and cuddling in bed. They openly entertain the possibility that part of puberty is becoming sexually active:

Your own experiences with sex start with yourself ... Thus, you can have sex with yourself, but also with others. You make love because you and the other person enjoy it. But there are valid reasons not to make love to someone yet. For example, because you don't want it, because you are not ready for it yet, or because of your religion. (Hendriks, 1999, p. 86)

and

When you love someone, you regularly want to show it, for example, by caressing or by hugging. When you love the person very much, you may want to make love to this person and to have intercourse ... There are people who believe that intercourse is only allowed within marriage ... Other people have different ideas about it. (Smits & Waas, 1999b, p. 164)

The Dutch texts also have a considerably more wide-ranging discussion of what constitutes 'sex'. One text reproduces an article about safe sex which includes advice about the hygienic use of dildos and vibrators; such devices are never mentioned in any British book, whether for science, PSE or home reading (Smits & Waas, 1999b, p. 176).

Coverage of sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs) is very limited in British books published before 1993, and after that date STDs were removed from the National Curriculum by the 1993 Education Act. Only two books discuss STDs in some detail. Smallman (1987) discusses gonorrhoea and syphilis, but while gonorrhoea rates were rising at the time of publication, syphilis had been virtually eradicated; in 1986 only 32 men and 14 women under 19 contracted it. Common STDs such as herpes, genital warts and chlamydia are ignored and HIV/AIDS given only a passing mention. Roberts and Mawby (1991) mention only syphilis and AIDS. During the 1993 Parliamentary Debates on sex education, some peers argued that there should be more teaching about traditional 'venereal disease' and less about AIDS, which they claimed affected only homosexuals and drug addicts [23]. STDs are covered in more detail and more comprehensively in Dutch science books, with an emphasis on telling your partner if you become infected. One book reproduced posters from public health STD campaigns. Homosexuality is also openly treated in all Dutch books. In Heida *et al.* (2000, chapter 4.2) the chapter 'With whom would you like to wake up?' covers lesbianism, bisexuality and homosexuality (see also Akkerman, 2000a, p. 87), explaining that the causes of homosexuality are not known, and that some people disapprove of it, but implying that this view is rather old-fashioned. Homosexuality and STDs were also treated with great openness in the Dutch classrooms. A biology lesson observed in Utrecht opened with a frank discussion of different names for genitals, slang words for intercourse, and how men and women talk about sex differently. This might happen in a PSE lesson in England, but not in a science class.

The British literature is most striking, relative to the Dutch, for its omissions. Because acknowledgement of teenage sexuality and homosexuality are controversial, it becomes difficult to treat teenage sexual relationships, contraception and STDs. The first two of these may additionally be deemed to lie outside 'pure' science. However, given that science is a compulsory subject in England, it is also likely that the political controversies over sex education have particularly strong effects. In respect of the way in which they cover sex education, the Dutch science texts more closely resemble PSE texts and books for private reading in England.

### *PSE Materials*

We examined six British PSE courses: two general PSE courses, two specifically sex education courses, and two courses produced from a Christian viewpoint [24], together with three more experimental resources involving the use of infant simulators and extensive role playing, which were observed in classrooms. These were compared with six Dutch resources for 'care', one of which was produced by a Catholic education

organisation [25]. Dutch texts usually begin with a discussion of the household unit in its broadest sense and talk about single people, married couples, extended families, nuclear families, communes (including religious communities), gay partnerships, heterosexual cohabitation, foster families and 'living apart together', that is, stable relationships in which couples continue to live apart. In the UK, where the 1999/2000 sex education debates hinged on the importance of promoting marriage, the issue is so controversial that PSE texts tend to be silent on the issue of adult sexual relationships. One of the Dutch texts (Kaaij *et al.*, 1993) gives the telephone number for a gay help-line in the body of the text; PSE books tend to list this at the very back and traditionalists have argued that displaying it at all is tantamount to promoting homosexuality. One Dutch teacher in a class observed in Nieuwegein discussed the fact that she herself was lesbian, and posters about HIV/AIDS and where to get information on STDs and contraception were put up on the walls of the classroom. Nevertheless, Dutch and British texts treat topics such as contraception and STDs in a similar way; the differences lie more in the way in which the information is embedded in the texts and in the underlying approaches to the subject.

British PSE resources aim above all to build 'self-esteem' (a goal shared by traditionalists and liberals), decision-making skills and the capacity to resist peer group pressure. These personal skills are frequently developed in the context of work on drugs, smoking or alcohol education, whereas Dutch sex education is embedded in courses that more closely resemble home economics and human relationships, covering issues such as nutrition, bicycle repair, care for elderly people and lifestyles in a pluralist society. Building self-esteem is seen by liberal British sex educators as the crucial underpinning to a healthy approach to life. As the authors of *Health and Self* wrote in their introduction:

These materials reflect the philosophy that health education is part of a broad process of socialisation ... The picture that individuals develop about themselves is called self-concept. Self-esteem is the evaluation an individual makes of the value of that picture. In terms of social and emotional health, people who have a positive and realistic image of themselves tend to achieve a better balance in their relationships. (HEA, 1991, p. 5)

Risk-taking behaviours, whether unprotected sex, drug-taking or smoking are perceived in this and other PSE materials to be the consequences of low self-esteem. However, a Christian schools worker in the London borough expressed doubts about the concept in the context of his efforts to promote abstinence: 'The buzz words are self-esteem and self-awareness, so it is difficult, against that self-focused background, to tell people to deny themselves pleasures' [26]. His main point highlighted the way in which the concept of self-esteem focuses on the individual rather than the relationship.

*Health Skills for Life* is a British course structured entirely around skills designed to build self-esteem. There is little that a traditionalist could take exception to, but nor is there much attention to relationships or any mention of contraception and related topics. Little guidance is given about initiating and developing early romantic or sexual relationships. The two British courses devoted to sex education, *Taught not Caught* and *Taking Sex Seriously*, address relationships, but focus on 'how to say no' to penetrative sex, the assumption being that boys will be the sexual aggressors.

The Dutch programmes promote the idea of sexual pleasure far more than their British equivalents, but it is significant that the central aim is described as promoting 'self-reliance' and 'mutual respect' rather than self-esteem. When these ideas were

written into the attainment targets for Dutch primary schools in 1991, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary defined them in the following way:

... pupils can stand up for themselves and take others into account. This means that they can apply their own thoughts, attitudes and feelings and make them clear to others, and that they can empathise with the feelings, attitudes and situations of others. [27]

The 1998–2003 attainment targets for secondary education also stressed the idea that pupils should be able to care for themselves and other people (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen, 1998).

Roger Ingham's (1998, p. 3) study of matched samples of 100 people aged between 16 and 30 in the UK and in The Netherlands used the idea of 'interactional competence', which has been argued to be crucial to controlling a sexual encounter: 'preventive behaviour can never be the result of a strictly individual weighing and deciding, but always the consequence of an interaction, in which the wishes and intentions of one partner are being confronted with those of another'. He found that on all measures the Dutch did better and concluded that this suggested the benefits of the more open Dutch approach to sex education. It may also be a product of the greater emphasis the Dutch place on teaching both self-reliance *and* mutual respect.

Dutch 'care' courses place considerably more emphasis on the way in which relationships develop. The scenarios discussed in the 'Care' lessons observed in the Nieuwegein school dealt with a much broader range of issues than their British equivalents: dating, coming home late, negotiating with parents, how parents treat boys and girls differently and travelling safely at night were all treated in the classes that were observed. The Dutch texts stress the positive aspects of relationships and sexual intercourse (always referred to as 'making love', whereas the British refer to 'having sex'): 'You can explore each other ... Your whole body is full of places that want to be caressed, rubbed, licked or bitten softly' (Claessen *et al.*, 1997, p. 151). The feeling of being in love and the emotions associated with early sex are described in some detail. Again, it is possible for Dutch authors to assume that teenage sex happens. Leading Dutch sex educators have also observed the extent to which they stress not just how to say 'no', but also on when and how to say 'yes' [28]. Pupils are taught not to believe or to imitate peers who report lots of sexual encounters, because 'making love' with someone is pleasurable and exciting only if a clear decision has been made that that is what the teenager wants to happen (Dam, 1999, p. 212). Such a message is absent from the British materials (see also Whitfield, 1990; Mills, 1992). This point was also clearly observed in the classroom context. Very similar scenarios were introduced by teachers in both countries, in which a boy is asking a girl to have sex. The English teacher focused on how to say no, the Dutch teacher on how to decide when to say no and when to say yes. In British PSE courses, sex is often treated alongside behaviour to be avoided, for example, drug-taking, crime or smoking. The approach in the Dutch materials is rather to encourage the student to think about what he or she wants before the situation arises, and then to act responsibly.

In the British case, it was one of the two courses produced from a Christian perspective that focused more on relationships. Christian Action and Research in Education (CARE) produced its abstinence resource consisting of a video and teachers' pack (which can be used independently of the video), *Make Love Last*, in 1994, in the wake of the 1993 Parliamentary Debate, when Lord Stallard had quoted slogans used by the US abstinence movement with approval: '“Do the right thing—wait for the

ring!” ... “pet your dog not your date” ... We copy so much that comes from the United States, so would it not be a good idea to copy some of that?’ [29]. CARE claims that two thirds of English schools have purchased *Make Love Last* [30]. The other course, *The Other 3Rs*, was produced by Family Education Trust, the publishing arm of Family and Youth Concern, and is promoted as an ethics rather than a sex education course, which is not surprising considering the strong belief among traditionalists that sex education is a cause of teenage sexual activity and pregnancy. It is considerably more didactic than the resource produced by CARE, and argues that there is a universal morality which everyone should obey. This approach is entirely contrary to the Dutch one, which respects and makes allowance for religious-based differences.

In the British context it is paradoxical that both the Christian courses give more attention than do the mainstream courses to the issues of what sex is and why have it. It may be that this is only possible because the courses both promote abstinence. A sex educator, who uses the CARE course in the London borough, was keen to stress the importance of relationships, and regard for the other person. The programmes aim to make teenagers think more carefully about having sex by stressing that they are giving away a part of themselves by making love. As a result, it is emphasised that sex should be the final part of a relationship, not the form of initial contact between two people. *Make Love Last* uses an ‘intimacy continuum’ diagram, consisting of a pyramid of words, with sex at the top as the fulfilment of an existing relationship. While other courses tend to equate ‘sex’ with ‘intercourse’, this course tackles the fact that sex can refer to a whole spectrum of behaviour. Its discussion of sexual activities leading up to intercourse is more frank than any other course and it spends more time probing what pupils want from sex. In lesson 4, the class are given 30 cards listing different levels of sexual contact, such as ‘eye contact’, ‘showering together’, ‘kissing breasts’, ‘petting with clothes on’ and ‘petting naked’. The pupils are asked to discuss which activities are legal, which are proper only in marriage, and which ‘will not lead to anything else’. The last of these implies that past a certain point, people lose control of both themselves and the sexual situation, a view that the Dutch materials endeavour to counter.

Three further experimental programmes were observed in English schools, two parenting programmes with the explicit aim of preventing teenage pregnancy, and a West Midlands Theatre in Education group specialising in sex education projects. All were unconventional in their approaches, which Dutch sex education strives not to be. All focused on sex as risk and carried a preventive message. The parenting courses also aimed to teach the practical implications of parenthood in general, with the result that while teenage, unmarried parenthood was depicted as an entirely negative experience, parenthood in later life was portrayed as fulfilling. The programme used in the East Midlands school was imported from the USA and used the infant simulators produced by the Baby Think It Over company, which have come to prominence on British television chat-shows and soap operas. Two thirds of the pupils who took the infant simulators home said that they were happy to give them back; however, one third were ‘sad’ to do so. Boys in both classes were hard to engage. In one of the London schools, the idea of giving birth was met with comments such as: ‘I dropped it on its head and now it’s dead’, and ‘I had its toes pierced’. In the East Midlands school, boys ripped the head off one of the simulators. The behaviour of boys in the mixed classes that were observed in the English schools was particularly disturbing and contrasted greatly with the Dutch classrooms, where boys and girls worked together harmoniously and in a mature fashion in small groups on sex education projects. It is therefore significant that the boys in the West Midlands school were able to become completely involved in the

performance of the theatre company about child prostitution, in which the action was periodically stopped and pupils invited to discuss the options open to the characters and also the meaning of sex and power in relationships.

*British Books for Private Reading*

The British books for private reading are, in fact, most like the Dutch PSE materials in terms of their frank treatment of issues, often from the child's perspective, presented in an engaging way. Thus one Family Planning Association booklet, *4 Girls*, describes 'period blood' as 'often thick and reddish brown and may have small lumps in it' (FPA, 1996, p. 9), while another carries clear information about the sexual encounter, explains the risks involved in oral and anal sex and suggests alternatives to penetrative sex: 'You can make love without penetration—kiss, hug, cuddle, lick, stroke, massage, bath, dance, snog, wrestle, romp, fondle, nibble, rub, shower, play' (FPA, 1999, p. 31). This is similar to the Dutch 'care' text cited above, but would not be found in a British PSE text. However, in the FPA publication, these activities are nevertheless discussed in the context of health dangers. Miriam Stoppard's (1997) book is more like the Dutch approach in encouraging teenagers to think of such acts as valuable components of any sexual relationship. All the books cover STDs in some detail, attributing them to irresponsibility rather than to promiscuity. Again, like the Dutch materials, there is an effort to avoid teaching by instilling fear.

These books are not prescriptive in that nothing is said about what constitutes a proper relationship and all sexual orientations are embraced. But the books all carry a liberal agenda, some more forcefully than others, and in some ways they are more prescriptive than the Dutch materials. They make very little reference to parents as sources of information (ironically, one of the exceptions is *The Playbook for Kids about Sex* (Blank & Quackenbrush, 1982), which was another book castigated in Parliament for encouraging children to draw what they look like in a mirror nude [31]), although open communication is encouraged (e.g. FPA, 1998). Wellings *et al.*'s (1994) data on attitudes towards sex suggest that not all parents would be happy with encouraging comments on homosexuality and oral sex (e.g. Stoppard, 1997) [32]. The treatment of masturbation is also interesting in this regard. Many books (e.g. *The Playbook ...*) seem keen to encourage masturbation as a way of making young people feel at ease both with their bodies and with the idea of sexual pleasure. This goes further than Dutch sex educators in that it makes little or no concession to the fact that many religions—Buddhism, Roman Catholicism and Islam in most circumstances—do not endorse masturbation. Thus, while for the most part this section of the British literature provides an open discussion of issues to do with sex and sexuality, fully acknowledging teenage sex, it is not wholly free of the adversarial politics that bedevil British sex education.

## CONCLUSION

The major differences between the Dutch and British published materials on sex education are that the Dutch are more explicit, more comprehensive and more coherent.

Simon Blake, Director of the Sex Education Forum, commented that in the UK '... it still hasn't been worked out if it's [sex education] meant to prevent teenage pregnancies, make teenagers understand their bodies, or contribute to personal and social development'. The strong opposition to sex education by traditionalists has

meant that even in materials produced by liberals, the approach to teenage sex and sexuality is often negative. This avoids the charge of 'promoting' teenage sex, but also, paradoxically, means that the British liberal literature tends to focus on prevention at the expense of relationships. The political and legal difficulties British sex educators face in acknowledging changes in sexual behaviour and in family change make it difficult to treat teenage sex and sexuality in a rounded way, despite the acute awareness on the part of sex educators of the need to do so (e.g. Thompson & Scott, 1991). It is striking that the Dutch 'care' texts usually make some reference to the way in which attitudes towards sex, marriage and family have changed in the recent past, whereas no such discussion enters the British texts. Indeed, traditionalist arguments in the UK, for example in the materials produced by Family and Youth Concern, have changed very little since the 1970s. In large measure, the debate in the UK is rooted in the problem of how to acknowledge and address family change.

Different types of British text present very different kinds of information in very different ways. The British science texts are much more mechanistic and strictly biological, and the British PSE texts are much more likely to treat sex in the context of danger, risk and prevention. While the Dutch separate the teaching of sex education into science and 'care' in much the same way as the British, both sets of texts refer to physical and emotional development, and there is much more similarity in the topics that each set of texts deal with. The consensual approach to sex education in The Netherlands makes it much easier for classroom texts to take a more positive approach to sex and to talk more openly about the progress of relationships. Dutch care texts are more pragmatic, treating sex as part of everyday life, acknowledging the fact of teenage relationships, and dealing with the progression of teenage intimacy. Indeed, Dutch teachers said in interview that they were wary of doing anything to mark sex education out as different from the rest of the curriculum. In England, anything touching on teenage intimacy and relationships tends to be confined to books designed for private reading.

The adversarial climate in the UK and the strength of traditionalist opposition to particular dimensions of sex education and, at the extreme, to all sex education, means that some subjects are not given the place they deserve in the curriculum. The British science texts we compared were very weak on issues to do with homosexuality and STDs. The legal prohibition on treating anything that might 'promote' homosexuality makes discussion of anal sex additionally difficult. British PSE courses are more similar to their Dutch equivalents in terms of the topics covered, but PSE is not a part of the national curriculum as it is in The Netherlands.

More damaging than the issue of what is ignored in the British materials is the lack of coherence in approach. It is not unusual for British schools to draw on more than one set of PSE materials, combining traditionalist, more liberal, and newer imports such as *Baby Think it Over*. Given that opinion is so divided this may be defensible. It may also be argued that while these positions are fiercely fought over at the level of central government, they are able to co-exist on the ground at the level of the individual school. Nevertheless, the programmes all have somewhat different aims and different agendas. As a result, it is not so much that the message is mixed, certainly not in the sense that the Social Exclusion Unit's Report was concerned about, but that it is fragmented and far removed from the coherence of the Dutch programmes, which take a much more relational approach and put more emphasis on the positive aspects of sex.

The Dutch materials work in the context of a political culture based on the commitment to seek consensus, although some of the Dutch teachers interviewed were

less than sanguine about their capacity to draw in the children of first and second generation minority ethnic groups, whose parents did not necessarily feel themselves to be part of the Dutch consensus on sex education. The UK is a more pluralist country still, but the indications are that new ways must be sought to deal with the issues of relationships in all their stages, including the intimate, in the classroom. Some greater agreement on the need to address the issue is needed if this is to happen. During the 1999/2000 Parliamentary Debates on sex education, a consensus between Government Departments, Ministers and the churches was forged for the first time, but in the end traditionalists decided not to accept the compromise, insisting on the retention of Section 28 and a new moral clause in the 2000 Learning and Skills Act. Schools have to continue to live with adversarial politics and to tread carefully. The invitation to openness in the classroom is therefore difficult, yet Dutch sex educators regard this as fundamental to successful sex education. In Dutch classrooms boys and girls were able to work in small groups with a science teacher, describing to each other what they understood about models of male and female sexual organs, asking and answering questions, without the kind of crude jokes and name calling—almost exclusively from boys—that routinely disrupted the English classes that were observed. It is unlikely that an emphasis on prevention and risk, or on self-esteem, will by themselves further healthy relationships between teenagers in the UK.

The mixed messages about sex that exist in the wider society of both UK and The Netherlands are not so successfully countered by the UK approach, which allows pupils to continue to think of sex as something at once dirty, illicit and desirable. It is not 'normalised' as it is in the Dutch curriculum. Furthermore, it is extremely hard to achieve this so long as it remains difficult to acknowledge the changes that have taken place in the family and in sexual behaviour. The irony is that the greater emphasis in the UK on the negative aspects of teenage sex and on prevention continues to feed the often confused and sometimes crude perceptions of teenagers and the apparent lack of regard, especially on the part of boys, for relationships and for other people.

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#### NOTES

- [1] The materials examined are used in England and Wales, but the small exploratory study of the use of materials was carried out in England. We refer to the UK when broader debates and policies are discussed.
- [2] The SEU's remit is England only.
- [3] Selman (2000), for example, has highlighted the importance of the media in the British case.
- [4] Interview with P. Wijnsma, CEO Rutgers Nisso Group, 25 August, 2002, Utrecht.
- [5] Including: Family and Youth Concern, the Family Planning Association, the Sex Education Forum, and the Conservative Family Campaign in the UK, and NVSH (Dutch Association for Sexual Reform), Rutgers Foundation, PSVG (Protestant Foundation for the Promotion of Responsible Family Planning) and



NIGZ (National Institute for Health Promotion and Illness Prevention) in The Netherlands.

- [6] The English schools had very different records of achievement. In the three London borough schools, the percentage of pupils getting five or more GCSE passes at grades A–C was 60%, 66% and 98% respectively. For the East Midlands school the figure was 42%; for the West Midlands school, 26% and for the Surrey school 69% ([www.Dfee.gov.uk/performance/schools/99.htm](http://www.Dfee.gov.uk/performance/schools/99.htm)). There are no comparable data for the Dutch schools. In The Netherlands it is still assumed that there are no measurable differences in the quality of schools.
- [7] Interview, 20/01/00, London.
- [8] Buckmaster, 20/5/86, Lords Debates vol. 475, c. 225–226; Cox, 20/5/86, Lords Debates vol. 475, c. 229; Norris, 1/7/86, Standing Cttee A, c. 444; Bruinvels 221/10/86, Commons Debates, vol. 102, c. 1064; Wilshire, 8/12/88, Standing Cttee A, c. 1205; Cunningham, 9/12/88, Standing Cttee A, c. 1212; Stallard, 10/5/93, Lords Debates, vol. 545, c. 1098.
- [9] Bruinvels, 21/10/86, Commons Debates, vol. 102, c. 1068; Wilshire, 8/12/88, Standing Cttee A, c. 1205; Howards, 8/12/88, Standing Cttee A, c. 1209; Bennett, 15/12/88, Commons Debates, vol. 124, c. 1015; Stallard, 10/5/93, Lords Debates, vol. 545, c. 1098.
- [10] Blatchford, 23/3/00, Lords Debates, vol. 611, c. 457; Howarth, 27/6/00, Commons Debates, vol. 352, c. 797.
- [11] Bruinvels, 10/6/86, Commons Debates, vol. 99, c. 256.
- [12] 7/2/00, Lords Debates, vol. 609, c. 473.
- [13] Pearson, 21/6/93, Lords Debates, vol. 547, c. 127. The Conservative Family Campaign wrote in very similar terms in May 1999: Adrian Rogers (and Anne Weyman, for the FPA), Should sex education start at two? *Early Years Educator*, 1, 1 (1999), pp. 14–15.
- [14] Interview with G. Lenderyou, 2/06/00, London.
- [15] Sex education hijacked by the PC mob, *Sunday Times*, 31/10/93; clippings in FPA Archive Files, Sex Education in Schools File 2, London. Interview with Valerie Riches, Director of Family and Youth Concern, 25/2/00, Oxford.
- [16] Buckmaster, 15/4/86, Lords Debates vol. 475, c. 647.
- [17] Lord Bishop of Rochester, 7/2/00, Lords, Debates, vol. 609, c. 451.
- [18] Interview, 7/06/00, London
- [19] Buckmaster, 15/4/86, Lords Debates, vol. 475, c. 649; Blatch, 6/7/93, Lords Debates, vol. 547, c. 1320; Interview with Riches, 25/2/00.
- [20] TK, 1987–8, 20381, nr. 7, p. 50
- [21] Interview with Marcel Linthorst, Project Coordinator, NIGZ, 14/09/00, Woerden.
- [22] The English science materials for 14–15-year-olds that were examined in addition to Roberts (1981) were: Beckett and Gallagher (1989), Dobson (1992), Jones and Jones (1997), Parkin and Simpkins (1992), Roberts (1988), Roberts and Mawby (1991), Smallman (1987), Stuart and Webster (1996), Williams (1996). The Dutch science materials for the same age group were: Hendriks (1999); Heida *et al.* (2000); Smits and Waas (1999, 1999a); Akkerman *et al.* (2000a, 2000b).
- [23] Halsbury and Stoddart, Lords, Debates, 10/5/93, vol. 545, c. 1099.
- [24] Andersen *et al.* (1994), Health Education Authority (1991), Cohen and Wilson (1994), Clarity Collective (1983), Flux (1994), Rignall and Weeks (1996).

- [25] Bakker and Stutterheim (1993), Claessen *et al.* (1997), Dam (1999), Emous (1996), Kaaij *et al.* (1993), Passier (1994).
- [26] Interview, 19/07/00, London.
- [27] TK, 1990–1991, 20381, nr. 40, p. 46.
- [28] Interview with D. Braeken, Senior Programme Adviser, International Division, Rutgers Consult and Youth Consultant, International Planned Parenthood, 14/09/00, Utrecht.
- [29] 21/6/93, Lords Debates, vol. 547, c. 124–125.
- [30] Interview with Jenny Baker, Departmental Manager, Care for Education, CARE, 14/7/00, London.
- [31] Bruinvels, 21/10/86, Commons Debates, vol. 102, c. 1068.
- [32] Wellings *et al.* (1994) found that attitudes to such topics are sharply delineated between generations. Oral sex, in particular, is far more acceptable to the 16–24 age group than to their parents or grandparents.

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