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What Can the Netflix Series *Sex Education* Teach School-Based Sexuality Education?

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ABSTRACT

Netflix series *Sex Education* is popular with young people in a way school-based programmes rarely are. Analyzing the first three seasons, this paper explores *what* and *how* educative content is offered and how young people are addressed as sexual subjects. It is argued that *Sex Education* radically expands the conventional content of school-based programmes and attends to many critiques young people repeatedly make of them. *Sex Education* offers an example of how to educate about sexuality, via a queer and sex-positive approach where young people are understood as legitimate sexual beings who are authorities on their own sexual lives.

KEYWORDS

Netflix sex education;
sexuality education; school-based; young people; critique

Introduction

On January 11, 2019 Netflix released a television show called *Sex Education* (Nunn, 2019). Set in a fictional rural town on the outskirts of Wales, it tells the story of 16-year-old Otis Milburn who lives with his mother Jean, who is a sex and relationship therapist. Otis attends *Moordale Secondary School* where he establishes a sex therapy business with fellow student Maeve, who acts as his business manager. Operating out of an abandoned toilet block on school property, Otis uses his knowledge about sex gained from his mother, to dispense advice on sex-related matters to students. In its appeal to a trans-Atlantic audience the show is intended to be a blend of English and American culture, with students wearing American letterman jackets and speaking with English accents. Each episode focuses on issues related to students exploring their sexuality in ways that pay homage to cult-teen films, while grappling with serious contemporary sexual politics including queer politics, feminism, racism, poverty and ableism (Frost, 2020).

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Subsequently, *Sex Education* has been called “...one of the most quietly radical shows on television” (Brookes, 2020) not only for its sexual content, but also for how these themes are portrayed. Virtually no issue is prohibited, with storylines candidly covering topics from chlamydia, abortion, sexual assault, and pornography, to anal douching, rimming and how to give fellatio and masturbate.

One year after its release *Sex Education* was the fourth most watched show on Netflix with over 40 million viewers (Lee, 2019). Speaking about its popularity, creator Laurie Nunn explains, “I realized very quickly that it was an amazing opportunity to have a frank but funny conversation with a younger audience. The conversations happening at the moment in that area [sexual politics] are interesting, and moving so quickly, it felt a timely thing to do” (Frost, 2020). Nunn explains that the show’s writers garnered inspiration by thinking about the question, “What did I want to know when I was 16”? She describes her own experience of sex education as “practically non-existent” and remembers, “They (school teachers) didn’t talk about female pleasure at all” (Nicholson, 2020). As a consequence, “At its heart, the show’s about communication and honesty” (Nicholson, 2020) a note which resonates with its audience who praise *Sex Education* for its frank, detailed discussion of sexual issues that are important but often considered taboo within their families, communities and schools (Mady & El-Khoury, 2022).

The inadequacies of school-based sexuality education have long been critiqued by young people globally. In a review of 16 qualitative studies in 10 countries including Australia, Brazil, Canada, Iran, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, Sweden, the UK and USA, students report sexuality education is overly biological, technical and irrelevant to their contemporary lives (Pound et al., 2016). Sex is also presented in school-based programmes in a moralistic, heteronormative and reproductive way that emphasizes its negative consequences like sexually transmissible infections and unplanned pregnancies (Astle et al., 2021). What young people overwhelmingly request, is honest, comprehensive content delivered by nonjudgmental and knowledgeable professionals in a comfortable environment (Corcoran et al., 2020). This is one of *Sex Education*’s attractions, with audiences praising the comprehensive details it offers about sexual issues forbidden in their own cultures as presented in an honest and nonjudgmental way (Mady & El-Khoury, 2022). Addressing the critique of heteronormativity that students make of school-based programmes, *Sex Education* is also primarily queer-positive (Mayer, 2020; Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2021).

The extant literature reveals that when school-based programmes fail to deliver information young people are interested in they seek it elsewhere, with television constituting a significant source (Laverty et al., 2021). While

the series' newness means research on it is minimal, an initial study of how young people view *Sex Education* reveals its popularity is not simply attributed to its entertainment value, but also its educational merit (Mady & El-Khoury, 2022). This finding suggests *Sex Education* serves as an informal source of information about sex and sexuality for some young people (Smythe, 2020). Subsequently, the aim of this paper is to explore *what* and *how*, *Sex Education* might teach school-based sexuality education in relation to addressing young people's critique of school-based programmes.

It is argued that *Sex Education* offers information about sex and sexuality in ways that attend to many of the criticisms young people make of school-based programmes. Via its ability to attend to their critiques around the content and treatment of young people as sexual subjects, the show offers valuable lessons to school-based programmes about what they want covered and how. As demonstrated below, the breadth and depth of topics traversed radically expands the content of school-based programmes, while candidly attending to issues young people deem relevant to their lives. *Sex Education* also handles issues in a qualitatively different manner to school-based programmes. First, sex and sexuality are normalized rather than problematized in students' lives. Second, the treatment of all issues is sex-positive rather than sex-negative. However, this does not mean that sexual risks and dangers are ignored, but instead they do not dominate plotlines. In addition, the approach to issues typically regarded by some as controversial in sexuality classrooms like "sexual and gender diversity", "abortion", "pleasure", "anal sex" and "masturbation" are rendered in nonjudgmental ways in *Sex Education*. Finally, in accordance with young people's calls in the literature, they are constituted as experts on their own sexual lives and treated legitimately and positively as sexual subjects.

What follows is an exploration of these findings evidenced through storylines and characters across the first three seasons. This discussion begins with a brief description of the research methodology which explains how analysis of the series was undertaken. In the next three sections, findings from the research questions are explored in relation to the themes they generated. These themes speak to the critique young people make of school-based sexuality education found in the international literature by indicating what *Sex Education* does differently. In the final section, some limitations of translating these lessons from television into classrooms are considered and suggestions for the best use of *Sex Education's* teachings offered.

Note on methodology

To conduct this analysis the first three seasons (24) episodes were examined. At the time of writing the fourth season had just dropped (September

2023) and so does not form part of the analysis here. The mode of analysis was exploratory and involved viewing each episode twice (48 hours of viewing time) to answer an overarching research question about how *Sex Education* treats and delivers information about sex and sexuality and how it constitutes young people as sexual subjects? This question is considered in relation to young people's critique of school-based sexuality education as found within the existing international literature. To undertake this work, three additional guiding questions were devised to structure each stage of the analysis. These questions were; What topics relating to sex and sexuality does *Sex Education* cover? How are these topics presented? How does *Sex Education* address young people as sexual subjects?

To answer the first question, each episode was scrutinized for topics relating to sex and sexuality that it covered, and then these were organized into themes and sub-themes. For instance, the issue of "oral sex" was addressed across several episodes and could be broken into sub-themes of "fellatio", "problems related to fellatio" and "how to perform fellatio". Similarly, another theme was "lesbian sex" which involved sub-themes around "problems with orgasm" and "how to achieve pleasure". Once key topics had been identified, existing international literature around young people's critique of school-based programmes was gathered and examined. The aim here was to ascertain if such themes had been identified by young people as missing from school-based sexuality education and whether or not students had called for their inclusion in school programmes.

In the second phase of analysis detailed attention was paid to the series' treatment of the sexual issues traversed. Here the focus was on answering the second research question about "how are these topics presented"? To undertake this analysis how issues were integrated into plotlines was explored, along with whether this constituted a sex-positive or sex-negative approach. For themes identified in phase one as absent from school-based sexuality education by young people, analysis of whether their presentation in the series matched how students described they wished schools would address it was undertaken. For instance, as indicated below the positive inclusion of LGBTIQ+ identities in school programmes is a call frequently made by students in the international literature. Subsequently, an analysis of how queer characters were depicted and whether or not this portrayal was positive was performed.

Finally, the way characters were portrayed in relation to an issue was noted. This form of analysis was executed to answer the last question about "How does *Sex Education* address young people as sexual subjects"? For instance, were characters given agency to make personal decisions and were they shown in a negative or positive light? To take female masturbation as an example, the way this topic was configured in relation to the

character of Amy was examined. In this storyline it was noted that female masturbation was presented as an issue of Amy owning her own pleasure and learning about it so she could direct her sexual partners in how to pleasure her. As such, Amy was represented as empowered to explore her own sexuality and subsequently portrayed legitimately and positively as a sexual subject. In the next section, findings from these stages of analysis are explored as themes which highlight the kinds of issues identified by young people as what they want to know about and how they want them to be taught.

Breadth and depth of topics covered by sex education

An enduring critique young people make of school-based programmes is that its overly biological and reproductive emphasis makes it largely irrelevant to their lives (Alldred & David, 2007; Allen, 2005; Corcoran et al., 2020; Ezer et al., 2019; Hall et al., 2016; Lavery et al., 2021; Measor et al., 2000). Even in countries like Norway, where school-based sexuality education is perceived as more comprehensive, students continue to ask that, “... teaching reflects realistic topics and situations that are of relevance to them...” (Helbekkmo et al., 2021, p. 4). For instance, in a recent evaluation of their sexuality programme in Eastern Norway, students aged 15–16 years expressed a desire for more in-depth knowledge about; sex, the positive sides of sex, pleasure... myths about sex, falling in love, sexual arousal, their own gender and confidence (Helbekkmo et al., 2021). One of *Sex Education*'s features is that while it covers conventional topics such as, unplanned pregnancy (when Maeve becomes unintentionally pregnant) and sexual anatomy (Otis and Maeve labeling diagrams of female genitalia in science class) these topics do not dominate, and simply form part of a myriad of other issues the series explores.

It can be argued the range of topics *Sex Education* addresses significantly expands the conventional curriculum of school-based programmes. While not exhaustive, some of these issues include; *lesbian sex* (when a lesbian couple seek advice from Otis on achieving sexual pleasure together), *anal sex* (Anwar confides in Otis he is “kind of freaked out by bum holes, can you help me?”), *fellatio* (Olivia struggles with gagging while giving her boyfriend blowjobs), *pornography* (Lily and Eric watch gay porn to learn about sex), *anal douching* (Anwar asks Rahim for advice on this practice), *rimming* (depicted in the gay porn Eric and Lily watch), *masturbation* (Aimee, Otis and Eric all masturbate on screen), *revenge porn* (Olivia circulates a pxt of Ruby's vagina), *sexual assault* (Aimee is ejaculated on while on the bus), *sexual consent* (the way characters seek verbal/non-verbal consent during sex scenes), *stalking* (Liam continues to pursue Lizzie after she

declines his advances), *homophobic violence* (Eric is attacked by two men while walking home), *STIs* (Moordale's chlamydia outbreak), *social and emotional aspects of relationships* (Isaac's jealousy of Otis's relationship with Maeve), *sexual pleasure* (Aimee learning what she likes sexually through masturbation), *sex with a disability* (Isaac who uses a wheel chair engaging in sexual activity with Maeve), *orgasm* (Adam's inability to orgasm with Aimee), *queer identities and politics* (relationships between queer characters Eric/Anwar, Rahim/Eric/Adam), *asexuality* (when Jean tells asexual character Florence, "sex doesn't make us whole, so how could you be broken"?), *non-binary gender* (Layla, Cal and Eric as non-binary characters), *virginity* (Otis and Lily trying to lose theirs), *abortion* (Maeve has an abortion), *emergency contraception* (Otis and Ruby seek the morning after pill), *body satisfaction* (Aimee making vagina shaped cup-cakes to demonstrate vagina diversity) *vaginismus* (Lily's experience of this) and *sexuality in adulthood* (relationships between Jean/Jakob, Mr Groff/Maureen Groff and teachers Mr Hendricks/Miss Sands).

As this (incomplete) list attests, the sorts of issues explored by *Sex Education* are many and varied. Dudek et al. (2022, p. 512) note, this content "... confronts a range of double-binds and standards in relation to sex for under 18 year olds, that western societies are in deep denial or conflict over". Some of those issues include, the right to be LGBTIQ+, to experience sexual pleasure, have an abortion and to masturbate. The kinds of issues *Sex Education* traverses are those young people identify they are currently grappling with in contemporary culture. They are not confined to biological and reproductive foci determined by policy makers largely in the service of reducing unplanned pregnancies and STIs. *Sex Education* also deviates from school-based programmes in the level of detail it supplies about these issues, particularly around actual sexual practices. For instance, characters engage in graphic depictions of sexual activity in the opening scenes of 4 episodes in Season 1. Episode 1 shows Aimee astride Adam engaging in coitus while asking him "Do you like my tits"? Adam who appears disengaged and staring at the ceiling replies, "Yeah, I love your tits" to which Aimee responds, "Do you want to come on them"? The scene echoes pornified representations and expectations of sexual activity while undercutting these with a reality where Aimee orgasms and Adam fakes orgasm. This scene offers candid information about the logistics of having sex which young people identify they want, but view as missing from school-based programmes (Allen, 2006; Hirst, 2004; Waling et al., 2021). The treatment of this content is not clinical or biological however, and instead speaks to debates within contemporary sexual politics around pornography and gendered sexual roles.

Another example where the logistics of sexual practice is detailed occurs at Aimee's party. To assist Olivia who gags while giving blowjobs to her boyfriend, Eric demonstrates to party-goers how to give fellatio. While the scene is meant to be comical, it is also highly instructive with Eric issuing advice on technique. For example, he explains that, "rule number one is enthusiasm is more important than technique and don't go too deep, you can use more pressure than you think, but no teeth, especially if you are packing metal [i.e. have braces]". Eric then demonstrates on a banana by licking up one side and then enclosing his mouth over the top. He then berates Ruby for going too deep saying, "not too deep Ruby, just the tip okay". While the topic of blow jobs is raised by Olivia in relation to her boyfriend, the storyline segues to Eric who identifies as gay and shares his knowledge acquired from gay porn. In this way, the show embraces diverse sexual identities and signals that sexual practices do not necessarily adhere to particular sexual identities. It is precisely this level of detail which students have often asked for from school-based programmes (Allen, 2004) and which LGBTIQA+ students especially identify as absent for them (Ellis & Bentham, 2021; Waling et al., 2021).

Masturbation has long been a controversial topic in school-based programmes (Hossain Khan & Raby, 2020) with students historically being warned about its dire consequences such as going blind (Whitehead & Hoff, 1929). This historical legacy has continued with students noting masturbation's absence in contemporary programmes, or *if* it is alluded too, this is only in relation to males (Hogarth & Ingham, 2009; Ingham, 2014). Failure to discuss female pleasure and how it might be achieved is a persistent critique that young people make of school-based sexuality education (Allen, 2002; Ingham, 2005; McClelland & Fine, 2008; Tolman, 2002). This critique is supported by a substantial body of feminist research which also illuminates the rarity of this topic in the vast majority of mainstream media (Fine, 1988; Lamb, 2014; McGeeney & Kehily, 2016; Singh et al., 2021). Masturbation is not avoided in *Sex Education* nor addressed only in relation to men, with three of its characters (Aimee, Otis, Eric) shown engaging in it. Additionally, Jean demonstrates mutual masturbation in a sex therapy video where she provides step by step instructions on how to bring a partner to orgasm. This scene offers a level of detail never explored in school-based programmes. Similarly, in perhaps the first ever television female masturbation montage, Aimee engages in self-masturbation after consulting Otis about her difficulty in responding to her boyfriend's question about what she wants sexually. When Otis asks if she masturbates, Aimee responds with, "urgh yuck, I don't do that' ... I always have a boyfriend". Otis replies that masturbation might help her identify what she finds sexually pleasurable and that often women feel (wrongly) more shame

around this practice. After a night of masturbating, Aimee tells Otis, “I’ve been wanking all night. I ate four packets of crumpets and I think my clit might drop off. But I know exactly what I want”. This storyline offers a rare celebration of female sexual pleasure, acknowledging and legitimating its existence while providing educative information about how to achieve it. Interwoven with this storyline is an attention to gendered sexual politics that invokes feminist politics and offers a counter narrative to the depiction of masturbation as “bad”, “embarrassing” and “inappropriate” for women. Such normalization of female masturbation is a gift, not only for school-based sexuality education, but also mainstream media.

The normalization of sex and sexuality

Being sexual and seeking information about sex and sexuality are presented as a normal part of life at *Moordale*. Young people signal this is an aspect of *Sex Education* that is especially illuminating for them. An 18 year old male participant in Mady and El-Khoury (2022) study, explained that in Lebanon talking about sex “is not okay; it is ... [shameful] it is not how we were brought up. I was like this, but after watching the series, I realized it is normal – it became something normal to talk about” (p. 9). Students’ desire for school-based programmes to treat sex and sexuality as normal, rather than problematically, is documented in the existing literature (Allen, 2008; Gardner, 2015; Helmer et al., 2015; McKee et al., 2014). Young people in Lavery et al. (2021) indicated an appreciation of educators who speak about sexual health and relationships in a normalized way with one participant suggesting, “I think it would have been better if they [teachers] reassured you that it’s okay to talk about these things, and that it’s not taboo...” (p. 30). Young people call for this normalization so teachers might view student sexuality less negatively and as a way to de-stigmatize their sexual behaviors (Gardner, 2015; Kimmel et al., 2013). When student sexuality is constituted as “a problem to be managed” this can create tension between students and teachers that impedes communication of sexuality education’s important sexual health messages (Gardner, 2015).

Sex Education normalizes sex and sexuality by portraying *Moordale* students legitimately as sexual subjects who seek sexual knowledge and explore their own sexualities. Being interested in sex, and having sex, are presented as normal pursuits free of guilt or shame. This framing of young people’s sexuality is conveyed by Maeve during an SRE (Sex and Relationships Education) class where a visitor comes to lecture students about “how a night of sex ruined her life”. Speaking to an “all-girl” classroom, the visitor delivers her definitive lesson that, “I believe teenagers shouldn’t have sex because sex will ruin your life forever”. Maeve then interjects saying,

“Women ... shouldn’t be shamed for having sexual desires. You make sex sound terrifying but it doesn’t have to be. It can be fun and beautiful and teach you things about yourself and your body. You should be telling us how to do that safely. Not telling us to refrain from being sexually active because it doesn’t fucking work”. This statement captures how the series portrays young people as sexually active in ways that do not vilify or shame them. It also provides them with sufficient information to ensure these experiences are *safe* (always use water-based lubricant with condoms), *consensual* (when characters engage in sexual activity they always seek a partner’s consent) and *pleasurable* (by providing details about acts that might produce pleasure such as fingering, scissoring, fellatio).

As part of this normalization of sex and sexuality *Sex Education* positions young people as experts on their own sexual lives, while simultaneously revealing their sexual concerns and anxieties. This positioning is woven through the narrative arc of the series where Otis who is himself a teenager, imparts sex advice to other teenagers, despite initially being a virgin and struggling with his own sexual issues around masturbation and orgasm. Peer educators are often valued by young people for being easier to talk to and more attuned to their lives than teachers who are perceived as judgemental (Forrest, 2004; Sun et al., 2018). Throughout the series, teenagers talk together and learn from each other, as for example when Rahim explains anal douching to Anwar. While the series’ youthful characters have their own vulnerabilities and foibles, they are also rendered mature and knowledgeable in ways that school-based programmes do not typically acknowledge. For instance, when Anwar explains to Rahim that he can’t ask his boyfriend about douching because “it’s embarrassing”, Rahim replies, “If you’re not ready to talk about douching with your boyfriend, you’re definitely not ready to have his cock in your arse”. *Sex Education*’s presentation of young people as authorities of sexual knowledge constitutes them legitimately and positively as sexual subjects. The show’s popularity implies this mode of address resonates with young people and deviates from the way school-based programmes position them as “immature”, “irresponsible” and dependant on adult guidance (Allen, 2005; Corcoran et al., 2020).

Sex and sexuality’s normalization in *Sex Education* also extends to its treatment of LGBTIQ+ identities. The series depicts a world in which queer characters are out, but not defined by their sexuality and where the community is predominately queer positive (Mayer, 2020). One example here is Eric, Otis’s best friend who declares “I’m gay” in response to Lily’s offer to have sex with him. Eric dresses in bright colors, wears make-up and jewelry and has an immediate family and church congregation who are generally supportive of his sexuality. His gayness is normalized, in that Eric

is never referred to as “gay” (by heterosexual characters at least) and being gay does not dominate his personality or render him one dimensional (Mayer, 2020). Nunn explains, the blending of American/British culture in the show aims to produce a kind of “teenage utopia” with *Moordale* exuding a fantasy quality (Henman, 2020). This fantasy character stretches to representations of sexual and gender identity as unremarkable and taken-for granted in everyday life. Another example of this normalization occurs when Maeve meets Jackson’s parents for the first time, and they are a mixed-ethnicity lesbian couple. This family composition is configured as banal and ordinary within the storyline, via the way Jackson does not mention it to Maeve in advance, nor does Maeve pass comment on it. The only remark Maeve makes about Jackson’s mothers is in a later episode in response to his admission that his “life is not so shiny” and she replies, “I thought your family was perfect”. Being gay *simply is* for students (although not all adults) in the series, in a way that endeavors to disrupt the identified heteronormativity of schools (MacAulay et al., 2022).

The show also embraces gender diversity via its representation of two nonbinary characters - Cal and Layla. The challenge of being nonbinary in the cis-heteronormative space of school is demonstrated when Head girl Viv, is charged with notifying students that, “For today’s RSE class, boys will be in this class and girls will be in this one.” Can you please form two orderly lines? Cal and Layla are unsure which line to join and when the new principal (Hope) approaches, Cal explains “We don’t fit into the description of boy or girl, so where are we supposed to go”? Hope responds, “You can both go into the girls’ line”, to which Cal protests, “But I’m not a girl” and the principal replies, “They’ll be discussing female anatomy which I’m sure will be helpful for you”. This refusal of non-binary identity and the principal’s punitive response of forcing Cal and Layla to join a group they do not identify with, is a cis-heteronormative practice already documented in school-based sexuality education (Hobaica et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2016). In depicting this issue, the series highlights the injustice of such treatment and inability of some schools to acknowledge and support students who identify beyond the gender binary (Kosciw et al., 2018; Veale et al., 2019). Calls for schools to better attend to the needs of nonbinary, trans and gender diverse youth can result in tokenistic and superficial treatment (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Ingvar Kjaran, 2017; Tiffany, 2015). What is different about *Sex Education* is that acknowledgement of nonbinary identities is not where inclusion stops. Instead, storylines depict these characters in authentic and multi-dimensional ways (Dodson, 2021). For example, when Layla seeks advice from Cal about how to bind, details are provided about how to engage in this practice without causing physical injury. Similarly, Cal’s relationship

with Jackson offers an example of how sexual and/or romantic relationships might be navigated as a nonbinary person, or partner of a nonbinary person.

So called “controversial” issues rendered in a nonjudgmental way

A repeated call from young people in the sexuality education literature is the need for school-based programmes to be delivered in a nonjudgmental way (Corcoran et al., 2020; Pound et al., 2016). In their study of students’ views of how sexuality education (called Life Orientation in South Africa) is taught in schools in the Eastern and Western provinces, Mayeza and Vincent (2019) found young people were critical of teachers’ moralistic approach. This often manifested in mobilization of discourses of childhood innocence which constitute talk about sexuality between adults and children inappropriate. It also led to students feeling inhibited to ask questions and express views about sexuality as they feared being judged. What participants wanted was classroom spaces where the atmosphere was “free”, “open” and “nonjudgmental” and where teachers were less directive and treated them like adults. Similarly, Laverty et al. (2021) found in research with 12-19 year olds in Canada that participants wanted, “balanced content” and “information that encourages informed decision making, as opposed to rigid instructions that dictate the decisions youth should make” (p. 31). Participants identified that to achieve this kind of sexuality education would require not only detailing the potential risks or negative outcomes associated with sexual activity, but also positive and healthy sex and relationships. Students wanted this information so they could make their own informed decisions about their sexuality, relationships, and sexual health.

One way *Sex Education* achieves a nonjudgmental perspective is through its sex-positive approach. As Isaac a 17 year old viewer of the series from Kent explains, we, “are only ever told of the horror stories in RSE”, while as Smythe (2020, n.p.) notes, “*Sex Education* quietly reaffirms the notion that anything, no matter how embarrassing or complicated, can be resolved, usually by talking to someone”. *Sex Education* also achieves a sex-positive approach by not stigmatizing young people for being sexually active or seeking sexual information. The normalization of diverse sexualities and genders provides another example of the series’ sex-positive framing. In addition, all issues from unplanned pregnancy to anal sex are communicated pragmatically to maximize realistic information and minimize condemnation and shame (see discussion of pornography and abortion below). The epitome of sex-positivity in the series is the school’s production of *Romeo and Juliet* re-written as a sci-fi musical by student Lily. With dancers wearing vagina hats, penis-tree-set pieces and simulated sex, the

overall effect is an unapologetic celebration of the erotic that derails discourses of childhood innocence, sexual modesty, stigma and embarrassment. This sex-positive standpoint however does not mean *Sex Education* avoids negative elements of sexual expression and activity. These are depicted in storylines of sexual assault, homophobic violence, stalking, sexually transmissible infections, unplanned pregnancy, internal homophobia (Adam's bullying of Eric), transphobia (Hope's treatment of Cal and Layla), sexual dysfunction etc. However, such negative experiences are merely part of the series' sexual mosaic, rather than featuring in it.

Pornography use is considered a controversial issue for young people both within public debate and sexuality classrooms (Quinlivan, 2014). A common view is that pornography poses a risk to young people's sexual well-being because it provides poor information about the realities of sexual experience and its risks (Albury, 2014; Flood, 2009). Lack of condom-use in porn for instance is believed to increase the likelihood of engaging in unprotected sex (Eaton et al., 2012). Similarly, the treatment of women as objects for pleasure and normalization of abusive sexual behaviors in much mainstream pornography perpetuates racist and sexist stereotypes (Brown & L'Engle, 2009). The government's latest *Relationships and Sex Education* guidelines in England echo such a view, suggesting pornography presents a distorted picture of sexual behaviors, can damage self-perception and negatively affect behavior toward sexual partners (Department for Education, 2019). Despite this, pornography is a major source of sexual information for many young people, especially when information on the logistics of sexual activity is otherwise scarce, deficient or inaccessible (Litsou et al., 2021).

Sex Education enters these debates by presenting pornography as an ordinary part of young people's lives, rather than something only to be ashamed of, or understood negatively. For example, Otis reveals porn's utility by consulting it to help a lesbian couple who seek his advice about sexual satisfaction. Within the series, young people are presented as legitimate consumers and producers of this erotic medium (Dudek et al., 2022). Lily for instance, produces pornographic comic novels where she creates an alien erotic universe with sexually explicit narratives and illustrations. Challenging the dominant social perception of pornography as harmful, characters are shown coming together to learn about themselves and others through it (Dudek et al., 2022). This occurs when Lily asks Eric, "have you done it"? To which Eric says, "not all the way, but I do watch quite a lot of porno". Lily says, "show me" and Eric responds, "you don't want to see gay porn" to which Lily replies, "I definitely do". This scene speaks to a recognition that porn (when it is free of sexist, racist and abusive practices) as beneficial in revealing "how to have sex" (Litsou et al., 2021) especially for

sex/gender diverse youth for whom this information is especially scarce (Albury, 2014; Hillier & Harrison, 2007).

Abortion is another controversial topic in school-based programmes which young people report is either ignored or marshaled to deter sexual activity (Corcoran et al., 2020). Young women in an all-girls Catholic school in Aotearoa-New Zealand for example, recount how they were shown a film about abortion entitled, “The Silent Scream” to scare them from having sex (Allen, 2005). In *Sex Education* abortion is depicted as a viable option for dealing with unplanned pregnancy via a storyline where Maeve unintentionally falls pregnant. Her decision to seek an abortion is portrayed as “neither sensational nor melodramatic” (Smythe, 2020) and instead depicted in informative detail from entering the clinic to the recovery room. Simultaneously, the weight of this decision is not underplayed with a storyline that communicates the view that, “few if any women approach having an abortion without a measure of grief. But it is not treated as a punishment for sex, merely one among many possible consequences of it” (Brookes, 2020, n.p). The stigma associated with abortion, and views of those who oppose it, are not negated however. For instance, there are anti-abortion protesters outside the clinic whom Otis accidentally befriends and gives relationship advice too. After this encounter, he asks if they will still shout at his friend when she comes out, to which they reply, “We probably will” leaving room for their opposing views. There is another moment in the clinic recovery room where a nurse who disproves of a patient who has had multiple abortions, refuses her request for a chocolate mousse. In this exchange, the stigma associated with abortion is conveyed. In covering all perspectives of abortion and presenting viewers with detailed information about this procedure, *Sex Education* addresses young people’s request for comprehensive and nonjudgmental treatment of issues so they can make their own decisions.

Conclusion

What might “sex education” teach school-based programmes?

In summary, *Sex Education* provides an example of how to teach about sex and sexuality in a way that responds to young people’s critiques of school-based programmes. In posing the question “what did I want to know at 16”? the series writers have inadvertently addressed many of the gaps in sexual knowledge left by school-based programmes and young people’s criticisms of them. This is achieved by traversing an expansive array of sexual issues that speak directly to young people’s lives and concerns. The series also acknowledges they are legitimate sexual beings in ways that positively embrace young people’s diverse experiences and sexual and

gender identities. Sex and sexuality are not simply presented as risky forces, but part of the pleasurable, awkward, life-affirming, difficult, embarrassing, negative, vulnerable, romantic and erotic experience of being human. As noted by Dudek et al. (2022), *Sex Education* "...is an example of how popular culture is plugging a gap in formal educative frameworks which are designed to support teens' engagement with sexual information and knowledge. In addressing that absence, the series...also foregrounds the unmet needs of contemporary teenagers for fit-for-purpose, appropriate, life-relevant skills around their understandings of sexuality and sexual practice" (p. 512). The final product is a vision of sex and sexuality as satisfying and life-affirming, usually only accorded to (heterosexual) adults who are married, or in stable relationships. For young people to be addressed by sexuality education in this way, is indeed "ground-breaking" (Dudek et al., 2022 p. 7).

The point of this analysis has not been to suggest *Sex Education* should replace school-based programmes, nor that its approach can be easily translated into school-based programmes. The fact that young people rate school-based programmes highly as a source of sexual information indicates they are not defunct in light of programmes like *Sex Education* (Corcoran et al., 2020). Rather, as participants in Laverty et al. (2021) study explain, while school-based programmes are considered important, young people recognize there are limits to what they can offer them. These limits relate to the institutional nature of schools which produce a hierarchal teacher/student structure, a risk-adverse orientation and requirement to attend to diverse cultural and religious community interests. Schools are highly bound by these constraints, which mean it is not always feasible to provide students with the content and approach they desire in sexuality programmes. Subsequently, to feel equipped to develop and maintain healthy sexual relationships they need access to sexual content beyond the classroom in the form of television shows like *Sex Education*. In addition, television as a medium has a freedom to explore these topics in ways school-based programmes do not. For instance, *Sex Education* can draw on the tools of cinematography including camera shots, musical score, and script, to create a utopic world that does not exist at school. That is, a world that normalizes the diversity of sexuality and gender and is young-person centric. There are also some topics that students just don't want covered at school and where a platform like television is more appropriate. One example here is representation of the intersections of race/ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity which students of color in Robert's et al's (2020) research feel schools are inadequately equipped to address (Roberts et al., 2020). However, the cinematographic rendering of a character like Eric can easily embody and manage these intersections in ways that

are informative for students. *Sex Education* is therefore not an alternative to school based programmes, nor is its approach necessarily possible in schools. However, it is an example of how student's critique of programmes might be addressed and a resource teachers may point students toward. They might even integrate it in their own teaching if this was viable and beneficial to students' needs and interests.

Sex Education is also not flawless in its approach to teaching young people about sex and sexuality. In fact one of the insights from the existing literature, is that no one source of sexuality education can, nor should be expected, to meet the needs of *all* young people (Corcoran et al., 2020). An area for future research might be a more generalized critique of the series and its treatment of young people and the topics of sex and sexuality traversed. While *Sex Education* covers an impressive array of sexual issues, it cannot cover everything and there are currently absences such as sex work, sex toys, group sex, removal of pubic hair, exploring love positively, and intersex and sexuality. Attending to cultural and religious diversity is a notoriously challenging aspect of sexuality education and one which *Sex Education* attempts through characters such as Anwar and Eric and storylines about abortion and being gay. However, it is almost impossible to embrace cultural and religious difference for all young people. This is apparent in the scene where Eric demonstrates fellatio on bananas which in some Pacific cultures would be considered profane because of the way food and sex are mixed in this act (Tupuola, 2004). While *Sex Education* should not replace school-based programmes and its insights are not simply transferrable to them, it offers a valuable example of how to attend to young people's critique of sexuality education in a way schools have yet to achieve.

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