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Too Much Too Young? Young People, Sexual Media and Learning

Sara Bragg & David Buckingham

The relationship between children, sex and the media is, in some respects, an old issue. The presence of 'sexually explicit' material in the media has routinely generated concern on the part of many commentators, even if what counts as 'explicit' has changed markedly over time. In recent years, however, this debate seems to have taken on a new urgency. The advent of new technologies – video, cable, satellite and the Internet - has made it increasingly difficult to prevent young people from gaining access to such material; and it is of course a premise of this book that Western culture has in general become more 'sexualized'.

The concerns expressed in this debate often appear to reflect much broader anxieties about the changing nature of childhood in contemporary societies: children are seen to be growing up too soon, they are being sexualized and their childhood is being destroyed - through, amongst other things, their access to sexual knowledge. As these passive linguistic constructions suggest, blame is laid at the door of external forces, most commonly the media and consumer culture. If they buy their children clothes with suggestive slogans, parents are held to be

complicit or powerless to resist the tide of consumer culture that pushes sexuality at their children. Young people, meanwhile, are assumed to be incompetent and unable to negotiate this new sexual culture, because they lack the skills of critical media consumption that might enable them to resist it, and because they are in any case ideally asexual or sexually innocent.

Research in this field, particularly in the USA, has often sought to provide evidence about the negative effects of the media, for instance correlating links between media consumption and what are considered 'undesirable' actions such as 'premature' sexual activity. This research implies that the causes of such behaviour lie beyond and outside young people's own desires and choices (Bragg and Buckingham, 2002).

Sexuality continues to be seen as an adult concept, which should not be allowed to intrude on the 'sanitized space of natural childhood' (Walkerdine, 1997:169). Such assumptions mean that questions about adults' own ambivalent feelings towards children can be marginalized, as can those about whether children themselves bring anything to the process of sexualization (Walkerdine, 1997:169-70). Children are predominantly perceived as in need of protection – although this often involves measures that are also designed to control them (Buckingham, 2000:12).

The debate about sex education in the UK has been highly politicized for decades, as many writers have pointed out (Thomson, 1993). It condenses many of these concerns about attitudes to children's sexuality and particularly towards teenagers, whose liminal status between child and adult makes them especially problematic. Broadly speaking, the post-1997 New Labour government has adopted a less moralistic stance than the Conservative party, issuing new guidance on Sex and Relationship Education (DFEE, 2000), supporting new training schemes for teachers and entering into discussions with editors of teenage magazines. In this way the government has tried pragmatically to compromise between local authority and parental control of sex education, and to acknowledge children's sexuality whilst upholding the norm of children as ideally non-sexual (Monk, 2001). Monk, citing Thomson (2000), argues that locating sex and relationship education within the curriculum for Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) and Citizenship 'represents a significant shift from the language of morality to that of citizenship and personal development' (Monk, 2001:277).

Nevertheless, young people's views are generally conspicuous by their absence from these debates. In seeking to redress this situation, this chapter reports on the findings of two projects that aimed to explore young people's own perspectives. One was a research project carried

out from 2001 to 2003, entitled *Young people, media and personal relationships*, and funded by a consortium of British broadcasting and regulatory bodies (see Buckingham and Bragg, 2003 and 2004). The aim was to investigate young people's responses to media images of love, sex and relationships. The second, *Media Relate* (2003-5), built on the findings of that research, as well as on media education pedagogies, to develop teaching materials on sex and the media, for use in school sex education classes (Bragg, 2006). Our starting point in both cases was that media are more diverse and contradictory than simply a collection of 'negative' messages: they act as cultural resources or 'tools to think with' for young people, rather than sources of oppression or manipulation. We also began from a belief that the formation of sexual identity is a complex process, which is unstable, insecure, always under construction in ways that cannot be explained by mechanistic psychological notions of role modelling or sexual socialization. And whilst we did not want to romanticize young people's views on these topics, we also did not assume that they would necessarily be coterminous with those of adults.

The first research project involved extensive qualitative work - over one hundred pair and focus group interviews with 120 young people aged from nine to seventeen (as well as approximately 70 parents) - and a survey of nearly 800 young people. We worked with a range of young people, both working and middle class, in the South East and the North

of England. We aimed to allow them to express their views in different forms, so in addition to pair and group interviews, participants completed a scrapbook or diary on the theme of media images of love, sex and relationships. The scrapbooks enabled young people to talk to us in ways they chose, about what they saw as important; they acted as both a record and reflection, thus bringing their voices into the project in more diverse ways. They also helped us to grasp in a tangible way what young people were talking about when they referred to media texts such as newspaper or magazine articles or advertisements that they included. Our approach was broadly to begin at a more personal or individual level, and then to move on to the more social context of the peer group.

In the *Media Relate* project, we worked with various partners to develop a set of teaching materials consisting of worksheets and a DVD targeting teachers and students aged 12-15¹. The materials were piloted in a range of schools, and teachers and students were interviewed about their experiences and opinions of using them.

Young people speaking back

In research, young participants – like adults - inevitably adopt particular subject positions, or construct versions of the self and others in relation to

widely-circulated public discourses on the topic at hand (see Buckingham, 1993). All the young people we talked to showed an acute awareness of the public debate about their relationship to sexual media, and this shaped the narratives and presentations of self they offered in interviews. Since they were aware of their positioning as innocent, vulnerable or media-incompetent, both in the domain of public debate and frequently in the family, their response was often to emphasize their knowingness, be it about sex or the media, and thereby to construct a powerful counter-position to the powerless one marked out for them. Thus, young people tended to present themselves as 'media-savvy' (MacKeogh, 2001) and 'sex-savvy'. Even some of our youngest participants engaged with and 'spoke back to' adult views; one ten-year-old, Lysa, cut out a problem page from a girls' magazine to include in her scrapbook and wrote above it 'I want you to know that the page below does not make me feel uncomfortable in any way, it's excellent!', as if she anticipated disapproving adult responses.

However, on other occasions, young people adopted a moralistic voice about sex in the media that was almost indistinguishable from the views commonly expressed in newspapers. For instance, some echoed the notion that the media offer 'bad role models', accusing texts such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* of encouraging 'failing, pathetic relationships' (Trevor, aged 17), and condemning celebrities such as Britney Spears for

showing 'poor moral fibre' (Jeff, aged 17). However, these concerns were often ironically expressed, voiced in relation to audiences who were always 'other' than them, and generally in relation to texts other than those they enjoyed. In their expression they demonstrated an adult knowingness about the terms of the debate that in itself challenged adult assumptions of youthful ignorance. In addition, young people often expressed a conventional moral agenda – one that confounded popular representations of them as lost in a moral vacuum. They were aware of the ethics of relationships, and often explained and understood the behaviour of fictional characters in these terms. They referred to notions of decency and propriety in relation to sexual images in the public domain, although their exact analysis varied according to age. In relation to the display of women's bodies, however, they were resistant to suggestions that this was objectifying or sexist. They were more likely to propose an 'equal opportunities sexism' that would involve the wider publication of semi-naked images of men rather than curtailing institutions such as the tabloid *Sun*'s 'page 3' bare-breasted models.

Our research participants were at pains to demonstrate that they were responsible enough to be trusted to make their own decisions, illustrating their media competence and literacy in a number of ways. For instance, Lysa argued that she understood what she should expect to see if she

was illicitly watching Channel 4 programmes late at night (these have a partially deserved reputation for explicit sexual subject matter), and so would not be upset by them. Alma, aged 10, explained how, when concerned about how a soap opera storyline might develop, she comforted herself with the thought that 'they [the producers] wouldn't do that because of all the little people who watch'. A group of older teenagers were scornful about those who complained about the sexual focus of a Friday night chat show, pointing out that the reputation of its presenter, its scheduling and the images in the title sequence already offered enough warning about its likely content. They argued that audiences had the opportunity to switch over or off, mobilizing the kinds of justificatory discourses about 'choice' that media institutions also use – although we might note how limited such choices tend to be.

The voices young people adopted in their scrapbooks were also coded generically in ways that reveal how the media serve them as a resource. For instance, some students treated the scrapbooks as a school project and adopted the kind of tone they thought would be deemed appropriate there – one that was distant and moralistic, involving a language of 'critique' that mobilized media-negative concepts such as 'stereotyping' or the idea that 'sex sells'. This was often at odds with the more pleasurable engagements with the media that they described in interviews, such as passionate fandom for particular films, programmes or

pop stars that were often shared with (and therefore helped consolidate) friendship groups. At other times, however, the scrapbooks did enable different voices to emerge. Sometimes this was simply because they allowed children to be more enthusiastic about the media – described as ‘heavy phat wicked cool brill!’ by Tania (aged 10) on the cover of hers. Others drew on media formats to play with identities; for instance, introducing themselves through the magazine interview format, listing favourite activities, music, ambitions and so on, as if they were a celebrity being quizzed. Krystal (aged 14) drew on the conventions of teenage magazines, constructing a layout of short ‘soundbites’ (often raising questions rather than providing answers - ‘why are girls mainly the softer sex?’), interspersed with icons of hearts and flowers and doodles, using colour to highlight key statements and a conversational, informal tone that also engaged her friends in writing contributions to capture ‘how we really talk’. This ‘youth magazine’ style may have enabled her to explore a range of contradictory feelings and views without enforcing closure. Such media literacies could be seen to give young people rather different speaking positions than the scholastic ‘voice of critique’ – voices that are noticeably less moralistic and definitive, and more self-conscious, reflective and open.

Defining what’s ‘appropriate’

Both in themselves, and by virtue of the ways in which they are distributed, regulated and used, the media provide a powerful set of definitions about what is 'appropriate' for children at particular ages; and while these definitions may be disputed, they are nevertheless widely acknowledged by children and parents. They provide at least some of the terms within which young people think about their relations with the media, and against which they calibrate their own developmental levels. Bea, aged 10, for example, described how her mother allowed her to buy a girls' magazine like *Shout* (aimed at her age range but pitched as though for slightly older readers) because she was '*fast at growing up*'. Growing up, in her account, is not something that happens to her, but something she can achieve – and her media consumption is a measure of her speed and success in doing so. Chloe (aged 17) described her mother's shock the first time she bought a teenage girls' magazine: 'she just didn't realise that I wanted to read more about stuff like that, rather than comics like the *Beano* and stuff'. Young people's active choice of media was caught up in family dynamics, and could serve as a way of communicating needs and a sense of identity. Chloe's co-interviewee, Angela, remarked of Chloe's purchase, 'it's you growing up'; that is, it enabled her to convey not just her reading preferences, but her development towards adulthood. Similar stories were told by others, where laughing at innuendo on TV in the presence of parents revealed that they had greater sexual

knowledge than they believed their parents attributed to them. Family viewing of sexual material emerged in interview accounts as a source of considerable tension, necessarily entailing assumptions about what was appropriate or necessary, and what should be proscribed or forbidden, both for males and females, and for adults and children. It was a site of struggle, in which competing definitions of identity were constructed, challenged, negotiated and defined as young people exhibited resistance or compliance with parental prohibitions or encouragement of appropriate viewing behaviours (Bragg and Buckingham, 2004).

Our interviews with children and parents suggested that what it now means to be a child or a teenager needs to be constantly defined, reasserted and worked over, rather than being taken for granted – and that sex becomes another terrain on which that definition has to occur. In some instances, as we have seen, the children actively resisted adult constructions of ‘childishness’, although in others, they sought to reclaim or reinforce these. For example, ten-year-old Will included in his scrapbook an article about an advertisement for Carlsberg lager using the model Helena Christenson, headlined ‘Probably the sexiest advert in the world’. He wrote underneath, *‘I think I should know about it but not right now because I think I am too young to understand’* – the ambiguous use of ‘it’ conveying and concealing a mixture of confusion and ignorance on his part. In this sense, perhaps, the media are creating

new ways of being a child – not corrupting but confronting young people with choices about whether to ‘remain’ a child or whether and when to enter the ‘adult’ world of sexual media.

Will’s serious, reflective tone captured the ambivalence of many of our participants who simultaneously claimed their rights to information and to self-regulation. They saw themselves as autonomous, calculating and self-regulating entities, in control of their own quest for knowledge, in relation to sex and sexual media material. They wanted to make judgements about what they did or didn’t ‘need to know’ and resisted or rejected parents’ attempts to decide on their behalf, often relating how they had outwitted parental attempts to do so. Yet they were also aware that current definitions of ‘good’ or responsible parenting almost necessarily entail regulating and restricting children’s access to the media. If they did describe their parents as allowing them access to more ‘adult’ material, they were careful to protect their parents from accusations of being lax and uncaring, by arguing that they themselves were uniquely mature and trustworthy. They did not necessarily reject the principle of regulation. Will (aged 10) solemnly reported that his five year old sister hadn’t seen ‘it’ (that is, sexual material of one sort or another) but had got ‘very close to seeing it’. Fortunately, he reassured us, ‘I always manage to get the control off her’. For many children, seeing material ‘over their age’ was a mark of adulthood; but so too was

regulating material on behalf of even younger viewers. For themselves, they claimed a right to choose - and this was one that their parents increasingly recognized, particularly once their children reached the age of ten or twelve.

Our findings suggest that young people frequently encounter 'sexual' media material, but that relatively little of this material contains 'explicit' representations of sexual activity. Nonetheless, the emphasis our interviewees placed on their self-governing capacities may help explain the particular dilemmas of regulating sexual material. Sexual media material has been increasingly drawn into the domain of personal ethics, conceived of as an occasion for individuals to scrutinize their own desires, conduct and responses, rather than one of social harm, as is the case still with media images of violence. For this reason, it may be harder for centralized regulatory bodies to obtain the degree of consensus that is necessary to win legitimacy when it comes to controlling sexual material. As a result, debate around media regulation seems to be shifting away from a state censorship model to an informed consumer model, as demonstrated by the recently declared commitment of Ofcom, the UK media 'watchdog', to media literacy. Whilst this seems a liberal, even audience-empowering move, it also places an additional burden of choice and responsibility on individual viewers.

Representing diversity

As many critics and commentators have observed, the media show an increasing diversity of sexual representations, often customized to particular social groups in the audience (Arthurs, 2004). Our participants certainly perceived the media as offering more diverse sexual representations than they could find in the school or family. For instance, many perceived a moral agenda in sex education that was fundamentally about 'just saying no' and that ruled out pleasure and fun: as Chantel (aged 14) asserted, 'school puts like a downer on things...it should be something that you like!' In contrast, they said, the media would explain 'anything you wanna know' and were more likely to discuss the *feelings* involved in relationships.

All our interviewees demonstrated a familiarity and confidence with the categories of lesbian and gay – whether as sexual populations represented in the media or as audiences for particular texts. Responses varied, however: younger boys in particular exhibited considerable anxiety, insisting on their interest only 'in the girls not the boy' when looking at sexual scenes on television, prefacing statements about male images by insisting 'I'm not gay or anything' and even expressing concern that merely looking at images of male models might make them 'turn gay'. Such declarations suggest that heterosexuality is

incredibly fragile, if it is so easily overturned by the simple act of looking. To this extent, we might even conclude that the media play a greater role in *disturbing* gender and sexual identities than they do in confirming them.

In contrast, older participants, and girls across the age range, tended to take lesbian and gay issues as an opportunity to rehearse liberal versions of the self. For instance, they were critical of 'compulsory heterosexuality' in the media, vocally asserted support for gay rights, and expressed enthusiasm for the liberal treatments of gay relationships in some drama and comedy. At the same time, they acknowledged that much of this was utopian, an image of how they might like life to be, rather than reflecting their actual experience. Indeed, none of the young people in our research identified as lesbian or gay. As others have argued, there is uneven development rather than a smooth narrative of increasing progressivism around sexuality (Jackson and Scott, 2004). So alongside these professions of tolerating diversity, interview data also revealed much about schools and families as sites for 'producing heterosexualities' (Kehily, 2002), whether through teachers using homophobic language as a tool for classroom control, or parents disciplining children into appropriate heterosexual desires.

In a sense, however, the substantive positions the young people took up on these issues are not as significant as the broader discourses about the self that they entailed. None of our young participants presented themselves as dependent for moral guidance on the authority of religion, traditional morality, or established experts such as teachers, even where they came from strongly religious family backgrounds. Nikolas Rose (1999a) has argued that this can be seen as part of a broader social shift, in which traditional codes of morality are in decline, giving way to questions of ethics or 'work on the self'. For instance, in our research, lesbian and gay sexuality was rarely discussed in terms of whether it was 'right' or 'wrong', but instead, as a question of self-determination, being 'true to oneself' and respecting the identities of others. Tanya (aged 10) exemplified this when she included in her scrapbook a newspaper image showing two women lovers, and remarked approvingly of it that *'I think these two women who are lovers are OK to be in a newspaper because they are happy and if they're happy they're happy'*. Honesty, happiness and personal freedom, rather than following externally imposed moral codes, seemed to be the pre-eminent ethical choices here. Such findings have significant implications for sex education, suggesting that it is likely to alienate students if they perceive it as overly didactic or aiming to instil 'correct' moral values.

Learning about sex – and sex education

Our interviewees were often negative about parents and schools as a means for learning about sex. Parents were often represented as ignorant, either of the extent of their children's actual sexual knowledge, or, paradoxically, of their need for greater knowledge than parents were prepared or able to provide. Many described parental 'discussions' about sex as shrouded in mutual embarrassment. When we discussed sex education in our interviews, young people were very disparaging, perhaps ritualistically so, since the anonymous survey results were more positive about it. They echoed what other researchers in this area (Measor *et al* 2000, Hilton 2003) have found, criticizing the focus on girls' issues, the bad behaviour of boys in the class, and instances of dismal pedagogy, such as being shown the same video about puberty two or three years running by different teachers. They claimed that sex education in schools taught them little that was new, and that the focus was much too narrowly medical or scientific, on 'the insides and all that' as Glenn (aged 17) put it. They argued that it was set in a preventative and biological framework, trying to alert students to the dangers and difficulties of sex rather than dealing with aspects of relationships.

The media therefore came to fill what young people perceived as a gap: in our survey, the media were rated as highly as mothers as a useful

source of sexual information, and considerably higher than fathers. However, if young people do learn about sex and relationships from the media, this is not a straightforward or reliable process. Young people often rejected overt attempts by the media to teach them about sexual matters, for example in more didactic teen dramas like *Dawson's Creek*, and they were often sceptical about the advice they were offered in problem pages or talk shows. They were not uniformly voracious in their desire for information either, as we have seen from Will's comment about being 'too young' for some kinds of material. Similarly, several girls explained that they had stopped reading particular teenage magazines because they contained information they felt they did not yet 'need to know'.

When we asked Will whether he expected to find out about sex from school or from his parents, he replied: 'Neither. I think I've got to work it out myself... by doing research. And then eventually when I get older I'll find out'. His curiously academic notion of 'research' seems to encapsulate something of the gradual, even haphazard, nature of sexual learning. His insistence on 'working it out himself' was also typical of the independent approach many of the children adopted, or sought to adopt: they very much wanted to be in charge of their own learning. Learning about sex and relationships was seen as a matter of actively seeking information from several sources, and making judgments for

themselves about a range of potentially conflicting messages. Such learning was often a collective process, conducted among the peer group (for instance at sleepovers), rather than a one-way, top-down transmission of knowledge - in marked contrast to formal sex education. Participants emphasized that they were learning to become self-regulating sexual subjects, responsible for their own fulfilment, rather than being passively socialized into a moral code.

An alternative approach

Part of the challenge of developing the *Media Relate* teaching pack was to address young people as 'their' media texts do, as knowledgeable, mature and 'savvy'. The materials covered four areas: research, drama and soap operas, magazines, and health education advertising. They drew on a range of best practices in media education, which emphasize talk-based, open-ended, hands-on activities involving media production. For instance, students are asked to create soap opera storylines involving teenage pregnancy, or to develop health education campaigns on issues such as condom use or support for lesbian and gay teenagers. Through these processes, they engage actively with how meanings and ideas are represented, the constraints limiting the messages on offer, and the opportunities for change (Buckingham, 2003). Media education practice of this kind is collective

and social in its conception of learning, rather than individualist, and values informal learning, hence the role of group work and the focus on talk. It is not 'preventative' or prophylactic: it does not seek to inoculate students against pernicious media influence, but to enable them to participate actively in media cultures by making their own meanings and interpretations. Again, this contrasts with models of sex education that see it as a way of preventing teenage pregnancy or only communicating 'facts' about sex.

There are obvious dangers in the originators of an approach also evaluating it, so our comments here are not designed to promote our materials above others. However, our interviews with students who used some of the materials were revealing. Students repeatedly told us how much they enjoyed 'being able to have a real debate' which perhaps tells us more about existing school lessons in this area than about the virtues of our materials. A task involving creating scrapbooks similar to the one we used in our first project elicited comments such as, 'that's really good because we get to write down our thoughts ... we can write about ... practically anything we want that's to do with love, sex and relationships' (girl aged 12). One girl aged 12, wrote that her scrapbook showed 'how much more we know', referring, presumably, to ignorant previous generations. Another presented her views of horoscopes and of problem pages in a teenage magazine, in each case summarizing what

she saw as their 'message' and delivering her verdict as an already critical consumer. This degree of self-awareness is not taken into account by many sex educators who tend to see young people as manipulated by media they cannot resist.

In feedback, students also often focused on lesbian and gay issues, raised by a role play exercise in which they debated how well magazines served lesbian and gay teenagers. Once again, this provided an opportunity for girls in particular to articulate progressive positions: 'I thought it was an issue that does need to be discussed and I wanted to give my opinion about why I don't think it's wrong to be gay' (girl aged 13). A teacher reported that a twelve year old boy had commented in class that a homophobic boy 'must be gay because he's got a real problem with it, he's obviously in denial!' Even where students did not share the liberal consensus of a class, it seemed that they valued an environment in which they would not be judged for their views.

Teachers said that they were 'pleasantly surprised' and even 'amazed' at the work students put into their scrapbooks, relating how diverse and challenging their ideas had been. It seems that many teachers, like adults generally, underestimate young people's existing critical faculties and their ability to highlight contradictions and inconsistencies in the media's treatment of sex. So whilst teachers saw the scrapbooks as

motivating for students, from our point of view it was equally significant that they seemed to have helped teachers to understand more about the world their students inhabit outside school, and thereby to develop different kinds of classroom dialogue about such issues.

Nonetheless, the materials did indicate problems in reaching boys, which have also been noted in previous research into sex education (Kehily, 2002, Hilton 2003). For instance, there were gender differences in responses to the scrapbooks: girls took to the task more willingly, writing at length in a personal tone, and paying a great deal of attention to presentation. They may also have had access to more visual material than boys in the form of magazines. Boys tended to write less, and their textual reference points were different: instead of magazines, they referred more to TV, computer games, music and (tabloid) newspapers, for example. In the context of the school, these media forms may be seen by teachers as more problematic than those preferred by girls. Mary Jane Kehily's work suggests that teenage magazines provide young women with 'a discourse that they can appropriate in creative ways as a form of expertise which links verbal competence with femininity' (2002:203). However, for boys to do the same risks accusations of not being masculine enough. In our own research, many boys adhered to what Pfeil (1995) has termed 'warrior' or 'heroic' versions of traditional masculinity, which insist on invulnerability, individualism and

'knowing it all'. In discussing a 'guide to kissing' in a girls' magazine, for example, Wesley, aged 12, insisted that such teaching should not be necessary for boys. 'It's a boy!' he exclaimed, 'He should *already* know how to turn a girl on, and nibble and all!' Such ideals of masculinity may conflict with redefinitions of the self as always incomplete and requiring continuous work that have been encouraged by consumer culture and by a new 'ethics of the self' that stresses self-creation rather than following prescribed moralities (Rose, 1999a). Moreover, a focus on forms of popular culture with which girls are more familiar may flatter their existing skills, whilst potentially leaving boys behind or reinforcing gender divisions in the classroom.

Continuing dilemmas

Whilst our educational strategies and our research findings reflect a broader emphasis in childhood and cultural studies on the importance of recognizing young people's competence and agency, they also point to some of the limitations of this approach – and in particular to the dangers of reproducing approaches from popular culture rather than offering critical purchase on them. There are dilemmas and tensions that arise for young people in this new environment.

Anita Harris refers to the 'regulation of interiority' to describe the work on the self encouraged by media and celebrity culture, and points out that the confessional mode has become a common way of engaging young women in popular culture (Harris, 2004). As we have argued, the media increasingly constitute their audiences in ethical terms - that is, they invite them to engage actively with the dilemmas and issues they portray and to take responsibility for their responses and views. Our interviewees in both projects were often sceptical about such material, yet this does not necessarily imply that they are immune to it. For example, problem pages, which most claimed not to read anyway, may be less significant for the solutions they offer than for the ways they define certain kinds of behaviour as problematic in the first place, or encourage readers to imagine themselves, for instance, as individuals in control of their sexual identity and conduct. Similarly, many young people spoke of completing the quizzes in youth magazines – which, albeit often in parodic or joking ways, are designed to yield information about the self for the purposes of self-assessment and judgement. Such media practices may help to habituate audiences to the rituals of assessing their own desires, attitudes and conduct in relation to criteria set out by the new secular 'experts' (Rose, 1999a).

Critics such as Nikolas Rose see such heightened reflexivity as a feature of the neoliberal consumer cultures that have emerged over the past

few decades (Rose, 1999a and 1999b). The rise of ideas of 'active citizenship' and of values of choice, autonomy and self-realization have produced individuals who are 'capable of bearing the burdens of liberty' in advanced democracies (Rose, 1999a). Rose argues that such notions also have costs. They generate the 'commitment of selves to the values and forms of life supported by authorities', particularly those of consumption. 'It is through the promotion of "lifestyle" by the mass media, advertising and experts, through the obligation to shape a life through choices in a world of self-referenced objects and images, that the modern subject is governed' (Rose, 1999a:261). In this new world, broader structures of support and stability have been undermined; individuals have been bound to become self-regulating consumers who are responsible for their own ethical self-development and well-being (Rimke 2000, Rose 1999a). Yet the discourses of voluntarism, autonomy and individuality that are so dominant today provide little space for other more critical frameworks that might offer different ways of making meaning of our lives and of the structured inequalities we also experience.

On occasions, we wondered if some of this might explain the anger and frustration sometimes vented by young people on the media - for instance, criticising them for creating pressures around body image, appearance, sexual activity, and so on. In some ways, these echoed

adult discourses about the harmful effects of the media and they may have also reflected the expected discourses of the school. But they also suggest a lack of access to other more complicated explanatory discourses with which to explain the pressures they faced. And it could be argued that our own teaching approaches also 'regulate interiority', inviting the display of the self and experiences. They might be seen as part of the same technology through which self-regulating and responsible individuals are created, rather than a critique of such practices.

We have argued that the media should be seen as a diverse set of 'symbolic resources', and that young people are often critical and reflexive readers. As noted above, whilst our research participants frequently encountered 'sexual' media material, relatively little of it seemed to be highly explicit, and it was heterogeneous and often contradictory in terms of the 'messages' it was seen to contain. The young people in our research clearly valued the media as information sources, arguing that they were often more informative, less embarrassing to access and more in touch with their needs and concerns than parents or school sex education. Yet they were not the naïve or incompetent consumers children are frequently assumed to be. They used a range of critical skills and perspectives when interpreting sexual content, which developed both with age and with their media

experience. They were sensitive to issues of 'morality' and right and wrong in their debates about characters' motivations and the consequences of their behaviour. To this extent, familiar adult concerns about the harmful effects of the media on children's sexual development might be seen to be misplaced, or at least overstated.

Nevertheless, these concerns about the prominence of sexual content in the media – while they are often exaggerated – provide powerful indications of the changing meanings of modern childhood. Children today may or may not know more about sex than previous generations, but in their dealings with the media they are increasingly called upon to make choices about who they are, and in particular, whether they want to remain 'a child'. The young people in our research showed an acute awareness of the public debates about their relationship to sexual media and this shaped the stories and presentations of self they offered in interviews. The growing visibility of sexual material makes 'childhood' problematic for children themselves, and not merely for the adults who so frequently seek to comment on their behalf.

Sex educators face considerable dilemmas on the ground, such as conflicts of interest between parents and local authorities, pressures to achieve good exam results that often squeeze out the pastoral curriculum and issues over teachers' lack of time, training and support.

However, we also need to bear in mind the wider contexts here. As Thorogood (2000) has argued, the contemporary 'explosion of discourse' around sex education indicates its centrality as a site for surveillance, or indeed as a technique of governance that seeks to produce sexually responsible citizens and 'normal' (hetero)masculinity and femininity. To this extent, we would challenge the idea that more open, student-centred approaches to sex education - or indeed the greater visibility of sexual material in the media - are likely to be straightforwardly liberating or empowering. Our findings do not support unduly alarmist positions about the 'death of childhood', but nor do they sanction an uncritical celebration of young people's agency and empowerment as consumers in the new media landscape. Our research, the materials we produced and the responses to them, illustrate the continuing necessity of frameworks for sex education and for media education that are reflective, critical and dialogic.

ⁱ The partners in the Media Relate project were, in the UK, the Institute of Education and the media education specialists the English and Media Centre in London. The project was funded mainly by the European Community, so it also had partners in Spain and the Netherlands. Some of the materials can be downloaded for free from www.mediarelate.org or bought with DVD from www.englishandmediacentre.co.uk.