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Young people and sexual pleasure in Netflix's *Sex Education*

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ABSTRACT

The inclusion of pleasure in school-based sexuality education remains a controversial issue despite a long-standing body of scholarship which argues for its importance. While recent studies reveal sexual pleasure remains missing in school programmes, it appears to be in abundance in the Netflix series *Sex Education*. This paper examines the series as a potential source of learning about sexual pleasure and the types of messages it offers young people on this topic. It argues that *Sex Education*'s treatment of sexual pleasure differs from school-based programmes in the way it often disrupts dominant meanings of sex and sexuality. While schools typically take a risk-reduction approach to young people's sexuality, *Sex Education* treats sexual pleasure as a legitimate, positive and commonplace pursuit which can be experienced through diverse practices and relationships. Much of what *Sex Education* is able to achieve in its treatment of sexual pleasure is attributable to the series being outside formal schooling and its deployment of tools associated with the televisual medium. Given the rise of regressive gender and sexual politics globally, programmes like *Sex Education* offer an increasingly important source of learning and counter narratives to politically conservative understandings of sex and sexuality.

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Introduction

The topic of sexual pleasure remains one of the most controversial inclusions in school-based sexuality education, despite a long-standing and rigorous body of scholarship that has advocated its importance (Fine 1988; Beasley 2008; McGeeney and Kehily 2016; Gruskin and Kismödi 2020; Logie, Perez-Brumer, and Parker 2021). Reluctance to address sexual pleasure and desire is in part attributable to a social perception by some that these experiences are 'dangerous' and a '... threat to the social, political and religious order' particularly outside the confines of marriage, procreation and heterosexuality (Ford et al. 2021, 615). Such views are finding new purchase amidst what some sexuality scholars describe as the 'global sex wars' (Gruskin and Kismödi 2020). These tensions are characterised by, '... attacks against sexuality, reproductive freedom, gender equality, and self-determination, as well as growing political extremism and conservatism' (Ford et al.

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2021, 616). Subsequently, Ford et al. (2021, 616) argue '... that now, more than ever ... it is the time to address sexual pleasure as a sexual right and a key correlate to sexual health and sexual well-being'. This paper is written with an eye to these intensifying forces and their potential to increasingly shape the content of school-based sexuality education. From where I write in Aotearoa-New Zealand, their regulatory effects are already being felt with a newly elected Conservative government announcing, 'all references to gender, sexuality and relationship-based educational guidelines will be removed and replaced from curriculums' (Palmer 2023). If teaching about sexual pleasure and desire at school is to become even more untenable in this political climate, then from what alternative sources might young people reliably source this kind of sexuality education?

While school-based sexuality education can be an important source of information for young people, learning about sexuality occurs through multiple sources, including media and popular culture (McKee 2012; McKee, Bragg, and Taormino 2015; Buckingham and Bragg 2004). Digital streaming platforms such as Netflix, which has 260.28 million subscribers globally, increasingly provide a potential site for such learning (Durrani 2024). Netflix is home to the series *Sex Education* which one year after its release had attracted over 40 million viewers and was the fourth most watched show on this service (Lee 2019). *Sex Education* as its title suggests, is not only entertaining but also educational with its creator Laurie Nunn describing how the show's writers' focused on the question, 'What did I want to know when I was 16?' (Frost 2020). In the genre of popular US High-school movies, it follows 16-year-old Otis Milburn, who establishes a sex counselling service for his peers at Moordale high school with fellow student Maeve. Each episode coheres around sexual issues students and the wider school community are navigating. Although set on the rural outskirts of Wales and featuring characters with British accents, the show incorporates US high-school culture to appeal to a transatlantic audience (Kornfield and Bassett 2023). The series' newness means research about whether and how it is offering an alternative form of sexuality education for younger audiences is nascent. However, a study by Mady and El-Khoury (2022) reveals it is fulfilling this educative role for young people in Lebanon, who describe it offers a safe space to engage with sexual issues otherwise deemed culturally taboo.

Given *Sex Education's* extensive global reach, popularity, and potential as an educational resource for contentious topics like sexual pleasure, this paper asks three questions: 'What messages does *Sex Education* offer young people about sexual pleasure'; 'How do these messages differ from those within traditional school-based sexuality education'; and, 'What are the implications of this for school-based sexuality education? Storylines involving sexual pleasure from the first three seasons are analysed. It is argued that the series normalises sexual pleasure for young people and particularly female identifying characters, providing a level of detail and scope typically unseen in school programmes. As such, *Sex Education* offers a potential unlearning of the norms of sexual pleasure presented at school, by presenting it positively and as a legitimate pursuit found in a diversity of sexual practices and relationships.

The paper begins by tracing the literature which identifies pleasure as missing from school programmes and the arguments for its inclusion. Next, how storylines involving pleasure were identified and analysed is outlined. This is followed by examples of these storylines focused on masturbation, diverse sexual practices and relationships, and the sexual agency of female identifying characters. Storylines are analysed for messages

offered about these topics, and how they portray young people as sexual subjects. Interwoven throughout, is a comparison between how *Sex Education* depicts these issues and their representation in school programmes. The final section summarises this discussion and considers whether *Sex Education's* approach has application in schools.

Pleasure in school-based sexuality education

School-based sexuality education internationally is generally conceived within a public health framework centred on danger prevention and risk reduction (Pound, Langford, and Campbell 2016; Astle et al. 2021; Corcoran et al. 2020; Alldred and David 2007; Measor, Tiffin, and Miller 2000; Larkin et al. 2017; Perenc and Pęczkowski 2022). As a result, there is a curriculum emphasis on reducing sexually transmissible infections, teenage pregnancy and other consequences of sexual activity deemed negative. This focus typically leads to a prioritisation of education about safer sex, contraceptive methods and/or delaying first-time sex. While the provision of sexuality education differs across countries and nation states, this emphasis varies only by degree (UNESCO 2015). Even in countries where sexuality education adopts a more holistic approach to sexual health, reference to risk and danger persist. Denmark, for instance, where sexuality education has been a compulsory part of public primary and lower secondary education since 1970, has a curriculum which expressly promotes a sex-positive discourse (Roien, Graugaard, and Simovska 2022). However, despite explicit reference to the importance of sexual pleasure in this curriculum, Roien, Graugaard, and Simovska (2022, 71) found it '... counter-productively provides limited space for sex-positive content ... [because] ... when it is present, it is regularly followed by content on challenges, risks and the need for caution'.

The risk prevention framing of sexuality education produces a medicalised, de-eroticised and biological curriculum which young people express dissatisfaction with (Rasmussen, Rofes, and Talburt 2004; Pound, Langford, and Campbell 2016; Mayezaa and Vincent 2019; Astle et al. 2021; Gowen and Wings-Yanez 2014; O'Higgins 2010). Programmes are criticised for failing to reflect young people's lived realities and relationships and ignoring positive aspects of sexual activities such as pleasure (Pound, Langford, and Campbell 2016). Recent Australian research, found that many students aged 14–18 years want Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) to focus not only on reproduction but also desire and physical pleasure; 'Instead of focusing classes on warning us about all the dangers inherent in sexuality, an open discussion about balancing responsibility and pleasure would be more effective' (Woman, 17, bisexual, year 12, Victoria) (Waling et al. 2021, 1123). Similarly, a study of 300 students aged 12–18 in the Netherlands revealed participants, '... want sexuality education to move beyond biological functions, sexually transmitted diseases, and reproduction into issues like dating, online behaviour, sexual pleasure, relationships and sexual coercion' (Cense, de Grauw, and Vermeulen 2020, 1). The inclusion of pleasure is deemed particularly important for young women, due to a heteronormative double standard whereby men are considered easily pleased and legitimately desiring subjects, and women are not. As one participant in Cense, de Grauw, and Vermeulen's (2020, 9) study explains, 'It is important that sexuality education makes clear that girls need to have pleasure too, so boys do not feel sex is just for them. Boys [who engage in sexual activity with girls] need to know about vaginas, you know, about the most sensitive part, the clitoris' (brackets author's insertion). Such findings are not

new, and this critique of the absence of pleasure and desire in programmes, especially for young women, has been documented since the late 1970s (Holland et al. 1992; Jackson 1978).

Feminist scholarship has considered how young people's critique of pleasure as missing in sexuality education has detrimental effects for young women. Led by Michelle Fine (1988, 33) the focus of this work is captured in the renowned citation,

... the naming of desire, pleasure, or sexual entitlement, particularly for females, barely exists in the formal agenda of public schooling on sexuality. When spoken, it is tagged with reminders of "consequences" – emotional, physical, moral, reproductive, and/or financial ...

Fine maintained that the repercussions of this missing discourse of desire for young women were the denial of a positive sexual subjectivity and their right to sexual pleasure along with the burden of sexual activity's negative emotional, physical and financial consequences. These ideas sparked a flurry of international studies that documented the absence of pleasure and desire in sexuality programmes in other geographical locations (Allen 2001; Lamb 1997; Lenskyj 1990; Harrison, Hillier, and Walsh 1996; Kiely 2005; McGeeney and Kehily 2016; Allen, Rasmussen, and Quinlivan 2014). Other feminist research exploring young women's sexual relationships also reinforced the importance of including pleasure and desire in programmes (Thompson 1990; Holland et al. 1992). Tolman (2002) found in her examination of young women's experiences of engaging in sexual activity in Canada, that participants often exhibited ambivalence and a lack of desire when making sexual decisions. She argued minimal knowledge of what embodied pleasure and desire felt like, meant young women did not have a reliable measure for whether they wanted to engage in sexual activity or not. Inclusion of positive acknowledgement of young women's desire and pleasure in sexuality education was perceived as one way to address this issue.

Those working in public health promotion have also recognised the value of including pleasure in sexuality education. Sexual pleasure is understood as integral to broader public health goals and can lead to improved sexual health outcomes (Ford et al. 2021; Landers and Kapadia 2020). Data from the German Sexuality and Health Survey, comprising 3472 partnered and single women and men, reveals the importance of sexual pleasure for making healthy decisions around condom use and STI communication along with experiencing sexual satisfaction (Klein et al. 2022). The beneficial relationship of sexual pleasure to sexual health has also been acknowledged in the World Association for Sexual Health's Declaration on Sexual Pleasure (World Association of Sexual Health 2021). This Declaration highlights, '... the importance of placing sexual pleasure in the forefront of sexual health promotion, comprehensive sexual health education and services and sexual health policy – reinforcing the concept of pleasure as an essential ingredient of sexuality, sexual health and sexual rights as defined by WHO' (Ford et al. 2021, 612). In summary, including pleasure as part of school-based sexuality education is strongly supported by young people internationally, feminist scholarship and advocates in public health promotion.

Despite this compelling corpus of argument, coverage of pleasure and desire in school-based programmes remain rare (Singh, Both, and Philpott 2021). In a recent study of 12–13-year olds in 50 schools in England, less than 30% reported that sexual pleasure had been 'well' or 'very well' covered in their Relationships and

Sexuality Education (Melendez-Torres et al. 2023). Gender differences were also apparent with 31% of boys, but only 21% of girls and even fewer non-binary students (20%) reporting this (Melendez-Torres et al. 2023). These findings resonate with research about the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ perspectives in school-based programmes in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Ellis and Bentham (2021) identified that even when sexual pleasure was included, its treatment was cis-heteronormative marginalising young women's and non-binary students' interests. Similarly, in Australia, Waling et al's (2021) research about what young people want from their RSE revealed, 'discussions of pleasure, sex positivity and mechanics of sex' were still missing. The need for sexuality education to close these 'pleasure gaps' is also evidenced in studies which continue to find women report significantly lower sexual pleasure than men in sexual relationships (Klein et al. 2022). Given the enduring failure of schools to effectively incorporate such content and the likelihood that this will become more difficult in the future, series like *Sex Education* might become increasingly important sites for such learning.

Notes on method

The larger study from which findings are drawn was concerned with what information *Sex Education* offers young people about sex and sexuality and how the series addresses them as sexual subjects. Findings exploring the diverse range of sexual issues covered by the programme are detailed elsewhere (Allen 2023). What occurs here is an in-depth exploration of one of these topics – sexual pleasure. Conducted during the first half of 2023, this examination covers the first 3 seasons (24 episodes) before the 4th season dropped on 23 September.¹ A form of 'textual analysis' (McKee 2003) was used which recognises that meanings produced are shaped by the subjective interpretations of the person undertaking the analysis. In this instance, I undertook the analysis drawing on knowledge of television framing and editing gained during an undergraduate degree and several years working in the television industry. Three phases of analysis were undertaken and involved watching each episode 3 times (72 hours total viewing time).

During the first viewing of each episode, in accordance with the larger study's focus on the programme's educational content, types of sex and sexuality information were noted along with associated plotlines. The issue of sexual pleasure emerged at this point and practices related to it were documented. These included, 'solo masturbation' (Aimee learning to masturbate, Otis' inability to masturbate), 'mutual masturbation' (Jean's video demonstrating how to masturbate a penis), 'fellatio' (Eric instructing peers how to perform a blow-job), 'lesbian oral sex' (Ruthie unable to orgasm when Tanya performs oral sex), 'fingering' (Otis seeking advice on technique from Ruthie), 'scissoring' (as a means of achieving pleasure in a lesbian relationship) and 'sexual activity and disability' (Maeve's relationship with Isaac, who uses a wheel chair). Explicit mentions of sexual pleasure were also noted, when, for example, Rahim questions his teacher Mr Hendricks about why gay sex and pleasure are missing from SRE and Maeve raises the idea of pleasure as ignored in the girl's SRE class. These issues were then organised thematically into headings such as 'female sexual pleasure' (Aimee learning to masturbate, Maeve identifying female pleasure as missing in SRE), 'diverse sexual practices' (fellatio, scissoring, fingering, mutual

masturbation) and 'diverse sexual identities and relationships' (lesbian oral sex, Rahim's comment about gay sex in SRE).

The second phase of analysis involved examining how the issue of sexual pleasure was presented and young people's portrayal in relation to it. This interpretation drew on my knowledge as a sexuality researcher with an interest in pleasure and young people. It also directed attention to techniques such as cinematography, plot and character construction to decipher how this representation was achieved. To illustrate this form of analysis, Aimee's masturbation montage (Season 1, Episode 6 - S1E6) is employed as an example. This montage is shot in her bedroom, which is filled with objects that reflect her personality and subsequently have the effect of emphasising Aimee as a person rather than a sexual object. The scene is shot from an overhead camera angle that captures Aimee's face and fully clothed body, rather than close-up shots of her genital area. This choice of camera angle constitutes Aimee as an agentic sexual subject, rather than an object for the audience's sexual consumption. The scene is presented as a rapid succession of camera shots, which dilutes Aimee's own sexualisation and lends an air of playful experimentation that centres the discovery of her own pleasure. Cumulatively, these televisual techniques can be seen to construct Aimee as an agentic sexual subject for whom the pursuit of solo sexual pleasure is a positive and legitimate act. This textual analysis draws on feminist understandings of female sexual pleasure which the show's creator also references in her description of the programme (see below) (Nicholson 2021).

The final phase of analysis connected findings about how sexual pleasure is presented in the series to what is currently known about how this issue is addressed at school in the existing sexuality education literature. This involved reviewing moments in which the issue of pleasure emerged in a third viewing of each episode and interpreting the potential educative messages offered. Continuing with the example above, during this third viewing it was determined that *Sex Education* presents masturbation positively for young women as a way of learning about their bodies and increasing pleasure in their sex lives. To compare this portrayal with how the topic of masturbation is typically traversed in school-based sexuality education, a literature review was conducted. This search revealed that masturbation is a largely ignored topic at school and treated as an 'embarrassing' and 'contentious' issue (Hogarth 2009; Ingham 2005). Specific literature searches were undertaken around other key themes identified in phase 1, such as 'pleasure and desire in RSE', 'diverse sexual practices and relationships' and 'female sexual agency' to ascertain how *Sex Education's* treatment of these compares with school-based programmes.

Sexual pleasure in *Sex Education*

Sex Education diverges from school-based programmes in the messages it offers about pleasure by presenting the pursuit of pleasure as legitimate and commonplace for (many) young people. While dominating narratives about pregnancy and disease prevention are present in the series (for example, Moordale's STI outbreak and Maeve's unplanned pregnancy), the joys and positive outcomes of sexual activity proliferate. The sheer number of times young people are seen engaged in sexual activity is one mechanism the show deploys to normalise this activity. A poignant example here is the opening sequence of S3E1 where at least 46 shots of people engaging in sexual activity appear in

just under 2 and half minutes. A smorgasbord of sexual activity is showcased including coitus, masturbation, role-play, oral sex, virtual sex, varied sexual positions, online sex, even BDSM and sex fetishes are alluded to via shots of a bondage mask and buttocks being spanked. There are casual encounters, solo sex, committed relationships, sex with props (for example, a drum kit) and with a sci-fi theme (Nicholson 2021). While sexual encounters between young people predominate, a variety of different ages (i.e. parents and teachers), ethnicities, genders, body types, sexual identities, relationships including gay, heterosexual and pansexual feature. The educational effect of this montage is to suggest that sexual pleasure is commonplace, legitimate, positive and its expressions diverse.

The placement of sex scenes at the beginning of episodes is another way the series establishes young people's right to sexual pleasure. Four of the first eight episodes in season 1 begin with young people having sex. In the opening scene of episode 1, Aimee is seen having sex with Adam in his bedroom while his parents sit downstairs. In episode 2, the beginning sequence reveals a young couple having sex before the bedroom door is flung open by disgruntled parents. Similarly, the first scene of episode 3 reveals Lily at her desk drawing images for a comic that depicts the sci-fi erotic universe in which she imagines her first sexual experience. A voice over (Lily's own) narrates the story she is creating,

... As she entered the interrogation chamber, Glenoxi felt her captor eyeing her. His long serpentine tongue oozed out of his wet, gash-like mouth. She eyed his pulsating purple penis inching towards it. She felt her abdominal sex cavity quiver. She could almost taste one of his three mucal glands as she pulled his glistening phallus inside her ...

Finally, episode 3 opens with lesbian couple Ruthie and Tanya dry humping in different positions and engaging in oral sex. Repeatedly positioning these scenes as opening sequences establishes the importance and ordinariness of sexual activity in young people's lives.

The educational potential of these scenes occurs in their display of sexual activity and also how they undercut the dominant discourses of sexuality. There is little 'conventionally sexy' in these depictions and instead they capture the awkwardness and hilarity that can accompany the lived-reality of sexual encounters. The scene with Aimee and Adam begins in a manner reminiscent of pornography, with Aimee bouncing naked on top of Adam and asking if he wants to come on her tits? When she remembers the last time this caused a rash, the couple change positions which results in Aimee orgasming loudly, while Adam unconvincingly fakes an orgasm. A potential moment of learning opens here, when the fantasy of pornified sex as always pleasurable is disrupted by the mundane reality that sexual activity can produce rashes and contrary to popular belief men do not always orgasm. Lily's erotic sci-fi sexual universe is also a digression from orthodox accounts of young people's sexuality. Fetish or themed sex is typically linked to adult sex-lives and designated to specific sexual subcultures. As a young person, Lily's embodiment of sexual pleasure as an interplay of fantasy science fiction and reality is unique. Her school also provides a supportive site for this exploration when Lily directs a sci-fi musical of Romeo and Juliet, replete with writhing dancers in vagina hats and penis-tree set pieces. Explorations of sexual expression like Lily's that challenge normative prescriptions

of young people's sexuality, are rarely, if ever, broached in school-based sexuality programs.

Unlike school-based sexuality education, which students often criticise for its failure to normalise and integrate sexual diversity in all its content (Cense, de Grauw, and Vermeulen 2020; Waling et al. 2021) in *Sex Education* queerness is its own norm. Being LGBTIQ+ is unremarkable in the utopic world of Moordale High, with over half the characters 'queer' in some form or other (Vázquez et al. 2022; Bergado 2020; Roberts et al. 2020). Explicit recognition of queer sexual pleasure occurs when the SRE teacher Mr Hendricks reads out an anonymous question from a student which asks, 'My boyfriend doesn't want to wear a condom. What should I do?' (S2E2). Mr Hendrick's response is, 'Ah ... hell. Condoms protect the egg from fertilisation' to which Rahim asks, 'Monsieur what about gay sex'? Mr Hendricks then responds with, 'Well, you can't get pregnant from, um homosexual activity'. Then Rahim says, 'But what about pleasure. People don't always have sex to make a baby'. Clearly, at a loss with how to proceed, the teacher attempts to resurrect his explanation about 'eggs', before Rahim interrupts with, 'What type of lubricant would you recommend for doing anal sex'? Through this interaction, *Sex Education* acknowledges gay sexual pleasure and via Mr Hendrick's ineptitude to address Rahim's questions, it makes a political statement about the importance of its inclusion in school programmes. Simultaneously, this scene provides vital, safer sex information for its gay male audience and anyone else with a penis, or those who engage in sexual activity with someone who does. This learning occurs when Jean, who is an observer in the SRE class, answers Rahim with, 'Well you should always use a water-based lubricant. Oil based products will decompose the latex in the condom'.

Sex Education offers detailed information about a broad range of sexual practices that might produce pleasure. This kind of knowledge has persistently been described as missing from school-based programmes, as a participant in Waling et al. (2021, 1123) study illustrates,

[RSE] Doesn't actually teach you how to have sex, or clean up after touching yourself, or giving head or going down on a woman, how to foreplay correctly instead of being a dumbass machine who ploughs through it like a wannabe porn star, etc. etc. Basically about STI's and consent, but no practical advice. Men desperately need it since their education is basically from porn, which makes for terrible lovers. (Man, 17, heterosexual, year 12, South Australia)

How to give sexual pleasure to someone else forms the focus of several plotlines including when Otis attempts to finger his girlfriend Ola using a (clock) technique he researched on the internet (S2E2). When this fails to produce pleasure, he consults out lesbian Ruthie (S2E2) who asks him to demonstrate what he did on an orange. After pronouncing the clock technique 'weird', Ruthie dispenses the advice that, '... there is no magic technique that works with all women. Every orange is different, but you shouldn't be asking me, you should be asking your girlfriend. Tune into her orange'. Use of the orange as a prop to represent genitalia offers audiences a tangible and less embarrassing way to learn how to engage in this sexual practice. Addressing dominant discourses which conflate women's pleasure with men's sexual technique, the lesson *Sex Education* proffers here focuses on 'relating'. Genuinely 'tuning into' and responding to what someone indicates they want, is more likely to be successful than technique garnered from the internet.

The importance of relating is a theme that runs through another storyline about pleasuring a partner, this time in the context of a lesbian relationship. Tanya and Ruthie approach Otis for advice because Tanya is unable to give Ruthie sexual pleasure,

It's like the more we try the worse it gets. Like we can't get in sync or find a rhythm. When we are having sex, I feel like I've never seen a vagina before, but I have, I've got one and I've looked at it a lot. It's got to the point where when I think about touching Ruthie, I get really, really panicked because I know it's going to be really bad. (S1E4)

After researching lesbian sexual pleasure on the internet, Otis suggests the pair practice 'scissoring' in the school pool, but this technique also proves unsuccessful. Later, Otis observes Ruthie kissing another girl (Jessa) and after talking with Ruthie she discloses she is not sexually attracted to Tanya, whom she has been friends with since childhood. In addition to providing information about the practice of scissoring, the episode also offers the insight that effective communication and sexual attraction are ingredients for sexual pleasure. How to navigate sexual relationships is an issue young people identify as relevant to their own lives and as neglected in school-based programmes (Pound, Langford, and Campbell 2016; Cense, de Grauw, and Vermeulen 2020; Waling et al. 2021; Allen 2005). What *Sex Education* does here is fold this information into a storyline that highlights difficulty in experiencing pleasure in sexual relationships.

There are many other examples where diverse sexual pleasures are explored in different types of relationships. Lily and Ola's sexual relationship, which involves elements of sci-fi fantasy, is one example here, where Lily's sexual identity remains unlabelled, and Ola later identifies as pansexual. Another is Eric's love triangle with Rahim, who identifies as gay, and Adam, who is bisexual. Experiences of sexual pleasure vary in this triangle, from Adam giving Eric a blow-job during detention, to Rahim and Eric's first kiss and their date playing rounds of Dance Dance Revolution in an arcade. Cal, who is non-binary and whose sexuality is unlabelled, engages in a brief relationship with Jackson, who is male and heterosexual. Slippage across episodes in how characters identify in terms of gender and sexuality, along with the way this can remain ambiguous, reflects how young people increasingly describe their lived realities (Hammack et al. 2021). The blurring of conventional lines that associate particular sexual practices with specific sexual and gender identities is exemplified when Eric teaches party-goers how to give a blow-job (S1E2). The precursor to this instruction is Eric's offer to help Olivia who has approached Otis about gagging when she performs fellatio on her boyfriend. This scene, in which a gay man provides advice to a woman in an opposite gender relationship about a sexual practice that can occur across a variety of relationships, challenges the documented heteronormative approach to sexual activity in school-based sexuality programmes (Kosciw et al. 2018; Roberts et al. 2020).

The show also offers a radical presentation of female sexual pleasure that disrupts traditional (hetero)sexual norms in which men are encouraged to be sexually active and privilege personal sexual pleasure while, '... women are conditioned to be sexually passive, reactive, dismissive and reputationally protective' (Emmers-Sommer 2023, 442). Aimee's masturbation montage (described earlier) offers a rare celebration of female sexual pleasure, by providing detailed information about how to masturbate and challenging the idea that this is 'shameful' and 'taboo' for women. The privileging of female sexual pleasure is also evident in Otis and Ola's relationship, where Ola is the initiator of

sexual exploration and achieving sexual pleasure for her is a dominant concern in the relationship (Stępień and Mhórdha 2023). Maeve also breaks conventional moulds of female passivity by pursuing a purely physical relationship with Jackson, being knowledgeable about, and an advocate for, women's sexual pleasure, and unperturbed by attacks on her own sexual reputation. This is evidenced when she responds to Jackson's offer to drive her home after sex with, 'We're just fucking Jackson, we don't need to know each other's post-codes'. Similarly, when Eric (S1E1) gossips to Otis, 'I heard she sucked off 12 guys in ten minutes for a dare' and Ruby shouts at Maeve 'what a slag', Maeve's response is to mime giving a blow job. This act of slut-shaming refusal positions her unapologetically as a desiring sexual subject. Maeve's knowledge about female sexual pleasure is also demonstrated when she labels the clitoris on a classroom worksheet (S1E1) and when she criticises the information offered in a gender segregated SRE class for its failure to recognise young women's sexual agency and the potential pleasures of sexual activity. In this same scene Maeve says,

And we 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 and you should be telling us how to do that safely. Not telling us to refrain from being sexually active because that doesn't fucking work. (S3E4)

Another female character who is actively desiring and sexually assertive is Lily. In a bid to lose her virginity, Lily indiscriminately asks male students, 'Would you like to have sex with me? It's a no-strings-attached kind of situation. I only want one thing. Your dick' (S1E6). When Otis indicates he is willing to fulfil her request, Lily imitates conventional macho masculinity by responding, 'To be clear I don't want to have sex with you specifically. Just a human man with a penis'. In this way, the show offers a counter narrative to the heteronormative sexual dynamics typically embraced in school-based sexuality education, which constitute young women as gate-keepers and passive recipients of male desire and more emotionally invested in relationships.

Conclusion

Implications for school-based sexuality education

In a departure from the risk-reduction approach that typifies most school-based sexuality education, *Sex Education* centres sexual pleasure as a positive part of young people's lives. While sexual pleasure is either absent in school programmes or its pursuit perceived as causing negative outcomes, in *Sex Education* it is normalised and legitimated. This presentation is achieved through cinematic tools such as montages which increase the frequency of portrayals of sexual activity to establish its normality. The show also acknowledges and engages with young people's investment in pleasure in a way school-based programmes have yet to do. It does this by acknowledging and exploring sexual issues that involve pleasure that punctuate young people's daily lives. This occurs through storylines which address masturbation, how to pleasure a partner, detailed information about sexual practices, different types of sexual activities and relationships, and how to navigate sexual pleasure alone, or with others.

By exploring these issues, *Sex Education* attends to content documented as missing in current school-based programmes. It also approaches these topics in a shame-free and non-judgemental way which young people identify as helpful to their learning (Corcoran et al. 2020; Pound, Langford, and Campbell 2016). The educational intent of *Sex Education's* presentation of pleasure is captured by Nunn, who describes, the series provides an antidote to her own experience of sex education at school in Australia and the UK,

It was just so full of shame and fear ... Now as a woman in my 30s, I'm able to look back and go, actually that had a very damaging effect on the way I felt about my own body and my own sexuality. As a young woman, I was taught nothing about female desire or pleasure. I probably didn't even know where my clitoris was, which is frightening. (Nicholson 2021)

Legitimizing young people's right to sexual pleasure as a means to enhance experiences of their own bodies and sexual relationships infuses many of the storylines described above. It also provides a justification for the inclusion of pleasure in sexuality education, which feminist scholars and those who work in public health promotion have also signalled.

So, what are the implications for school-based sexuality education of *Sex Education's* treatment of sexual pleasure? Some readers will be disappointed that this discussion has not included a critique of the overtly 'educational' messages offered by the series. However, this is not the point. The aim has been to consider what messages *Sex Education* conveys about sexual pleasure and to ascertain the potential of this television space to offer them differently. When this aim is taken into account, questions such as, 'Should school sexuality education adopt the messages and approach the series takes within the classroom?' become redundant. Schools and television are vastly different contexts. Much of what *Sex Education* is able to achieve in relation to its portrayal of sexual pleasure is attributable to it being a televisual medium. As *Sex Education's* Director Ben Taylor explains, 'Our take was that this is not the real world. It is a utopian school experience where, yes, you can still have your heart broken, and yes, people have challenges in their lives, but this level of intelligent discussion about your individuality and your sexuality is possible' (Nicholson 2021). As a Netflix series, *Sex Education* has a latitude to construct messages about sexual pleasure through the subtlety of tools such as camera angles, character portrayal, script writing and set construction, which are not strategies at schools' disposal. Schools are also highly regulated institutions that must answer to, and work with, the diverse interests of their students, staff and wider communities, which makes offering narratives which counter dominant sexual meanings more difficult. The slow progress around pleasure's inclusion in schools and fact that it remains one of the most controversial and divisive issues for sexuality education is evidence of these constraints.

To answer the question about the series' implications for school-based programmes, I return to the earlier point about the rise of regressive sexual and gender politics globally. Even if it were possible for schools to adopt *Sex Education's* messages about for instance young women's sexual agency or sexual and gender diversity, to propose this at the current historical moment seems naïve. What *Sex Education* offers, is an additional resource for learning about sex and sexuality that exists outside of formal schooling. It

is its existence in this space which makes it possible to offer meanings that counter dominant understandings about these topics, although this capacity is not unfettered. Given that spaces for such meanings may narrow in the future for schools, this televisual space provides a vital source of sexuality education with extensive international reach.

Note

1. While series 4 is now available, it is not included in this analysis because critical reaction to it suggests it has a qualitatively different character to the previous 3 seasons (Mangan 2023; Wilson 2023). Subsequently, separate attention will be given to it in a future publication.

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