

Sex, Science and Educational Research: the unholy trinity¹

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Abstract

This article examines the state's contemporary construction of 'sex' as an educational problem in England. It does so by interrogating the notion of the 'pregnant teenager' as it is semantically and statistically constructed in accountability discourses, as well as research constrained within them. It then examines certain features of an exemplary solution to the problem, as proffered by one of the largest contemporary research projects into sex education in the UK (the RIPPLE project). A critique is offered of the 'scientific' nature of some of these findings. We claim conclusions to be undermined by statistical and rhetorical gerrymandering, a prejudicial rendering of pupil 'voice', and an underlying reductionism. The article concludes that many of the features of such current problem-constructing and solution-rendering can be characterised as a false invocation of 'Science', and that their conjunction fuels an enduring infantilisation of educational discourses about sex and sex education.

Introduction

'We are led to believe that problems are given ready-made, and that they disappear in the responses or the solution. Already, under this double aspect, they can be no more than phantoms (...). According to this infantile prejudice, the master sets the problem, our task is to solve it, and the result is accredited true or false by a powerful authority' (Deleuze, 1994: 158).

What is the problem? The problem is straightforward: it is 'rates of teenage pregnancy' (Strange, Oakley, Forrest 2003: 201). It is 'one of our most pressing health problems' (DfEE: 1997). What is the solution? It is 'developing more effective ways of delivering sex education'. There is some recent consensus about these formulations (Forrest, Strange, Oakley 2004, Kidger 2004, Kingori et al 2004), and our own evaluation for the English Department of Health certainly confirms that politicians and policy-makers in England & Wales see both 'problem' and 'solution' that way².

The 'problem/solution' axiomatic is legitimated internationally through OECD tables. These prompted the English government to conclude that they have a problem that must be addressed: 'the under-18 conception rate is among the highest in the world' (Teenage Pregnancy Strategy, DoH, 1999). New Zealand was similarly exercised by these tables: it came 2nd, while the US had earlier noted that it was in the worst position, having 'more than double the teenage pregnancy rate of any western industrialized nation' (Centre for AIDS prevention, California, 1996). Indeed an earlier US systematic review of the international situation, involving 23 studies, concluded that the more successful countries, in matters of teenage pregnancy rates, were Canada, England, France, Netherlands and Sweden. They had the advantages of more 'openness about sex, consistent messages throughout society, and access to contraception' (www.caps.ucsf.edu/sexedtext, 5 August 04)

[table 1 here]

(adapted from 'Teen Pregnancy: trends and lessons learned, The Alan Guttmacher Institute, NY)

Such a conclusion from a systematic review prompts the first doubts about the validity and degree of the problem, constituted as such. Where did England's alleged 'openness about sex' and 'consistent messages throughout society' come from? After all, English researchers more often claim that these things are precisely what is lacking – and to be found elsewhere, perhaps in Holland (Social Exclusion Unit 1999). Nevertheless, the UK media headlines are fortified by league tables that endlessly repeat the lead story that 'under-18 conception rate is among the highest in the developed world' (Moore et al 2003: 677, Kingori et al 2004). It seems that moral panic about sex has an enduring fascination for both broadsheet as well as tabloid³. But the strongest doubts about the validity of this obsession are prompted by Bonell's historical account (2004) of teenage pregnancy rates in both the UK and the US. These rates have been falling since the 1960s. As the following table suggests, the 'crisis' can equally be represented as a fairly boring stasis:

[insert table 2 about here] (National Statistics Online, 2005 www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget, 8.9.04)

So if we ask about the same 'problem' in terms of rates of teenage pregnancy rather than international league table positions, we find a different picture. Even in a Guardian article (12.11.04) headed 'Increase in teenage pregnancies', tucked away in the second last paragraph, is a statement that there were 'nearly twice as many teenage mums 30 years ago than there are today'. Thus the logic of the audit culture constructs 'problem' as 'crisis', when from another angle one might conclude in regard to concerns about teenage pregnancy rates that twice as much as a lot less than before is not very much at all⁴. Pillow (2003: 155) describes a similar phenomenon in the US. The construction of the problem of teenage pregnancy has "corresponded more to who is getting pregnant, when and how (e.g. un-wed mothers and a pathology of pregnancy and mothering by race) than to actual teen birth-rate increases or decreases."

Problematizing the 'problem' as Official Sex

'The notion that "teenage motherhood" is a social problem is so deeply ingrained in public consciousness that evidence to the contrary is hard for many people to believe' (Phoenix 1991: 1)

Thus far, we can see how the problem can variously be represented as a moral crisis, or dismissed as a statistical illusion, or a minor social problem – major for the individuals concerned of course⁵ but not something that ought to be represented as devastating to the moral fabric of the nation. The question then arises: what kind of cultural construction is going on in relation to the 'pregnant teenager' within the discourses that we would like to label for the

purpose of our argument 'Official Sex'? This genealogical approach to policy analysis is described by Pillow (2003: 151) as asking: "not only how teen pregnancy is a problem, but rather how is the teen pregnant body represented, reproduced, regulated and restrained – and to what effects?"

Official Sex is expressed by the state in terms of central constructs such as the 'pregnant teenager' tabulated locally, regionally, nationally and internationally by means familiar in various other educational accountability measures, and addressed through the establishment of key indicators, strategies, guidelines and targets for improvement (in the English case, halved by 2010). We have touched on the statistical ambiguity of this key measure in the Official Sex discourse, and will return to the subject shortly, but the term itself - 'pregnant teenager' - is also very interesting as a symbolic evocation.

First, problems prefaced on the construct of 'the pregnant teenager', being by definition female, involve a covert exemption of the male. Impregnation, as male act, is not an auditable commodity. The 'impregnating teenager' is absent in accountability metrics and so we see – or more often fail to see - a silent substitution of the male by the female. In this way, female agency is foregrounded, activated as a focus for concern, while the male is 'passivated' in audit terms. Such an active/passive articulation is quite the opposite in most early sex education lessons, texts and parental accounts (Frankham 2006) where it is the 'active sperm' that fertilizes the 'passive' egg. As Moore points out, the story is also told in competitive terms, each sperm racing to its goal – 'Come on Boys!' (Moore 2003:290). The sperm is a 'homunculus', a little man (2003: 291). Laqueur adds that such depictions construct the process as 'a miniaturized version of monogamous marriage' (Laqueur 1990: 172). The boy takes the lead, proposes to the girl. The girl accepts the ring/seed. So sexual acts in sex education are written as male-led and analogous to a certain version of social relations between the sexes. These analogies, interestingly, are found in biological science as well, whereby the active/passive, donor/recipient 'sexing' of biological processes is common (Spanier 1991: 336). Science is not impervious to male sexism. But in the accountability audits of Official Sex there is a peculiar inversion; an 'unhomunculated' discourse is fabricated (Edwards et al 2004)⁶: the little man disappears.

On the other hand, pregnancy constituted as a female state is eminently measurable, and so in the audit culture females get pregnant, as it were, on their own. That conception is both immaculate and shaming, performing an underlying Madonna/whore dichotomy within the parameters of audit discourse and its mediated expression. The very category of the 'pregnant teenager' thus helps constitute a discourse of Official Sex whose problem-construction is apparently based on 'objective' definitions and enumerations (counts, rates, tables etc) yet which removes male agency, and foregrounds female responsibility. In Official Sex, Official Science (the construction, measurement and narration of the problem as given) is an instrument of blame, bias and reduction, suggesting that 'sex' and 'sex education' begins with pregnancy, and works its way back to the sexual agency of the female. The 'pregnant teenager', then, is no simple statistic, nor any self-evident concept. In a double sense, she is guilty as conceived.

Second, there is something of the 'father's voice' in this (Haraway 1991). Is this not the State as Father in communication with the Errant Daughter via a 'Science' that Irigaray has already identified as a 'masculine imaginary' (Irigaray 1993: 121)? The conversation takes place via the silent ventriloquism of the audit culture – indeed, behind the very smokescreen of

'transparency'. The state takes over the responsibility of the male as Male. The original father/mother couplet (impregnating male/pregnant teenager) is replaced by a Father-Daughter relation. The State-as-Father redoubles the 'problem' by pathologizing the daughter as the Pregnant Teenager - actual or potential - around and through whom national discourses of prevention, blame and remedy must flow. For example, the State as Father remains centrally interested in the paternity costs, as indeed is the media. When three sisters (aged 12, 14 and 16) were impregnated, the Sun's headline read 'Kid sisters: And guess what...You're paying the 31k-a-year benefit'. The girls' mother follows the logic of the State as Father and is reported as saying that she 'blames the schools for letting all this happen'⁷. Taken together, we see that the discourse of Official Sex substitutes the State as Father, and as Father Substitute to the Missing Father, whom the state's accounting erased in making room for itself. In a last twist to these embroilments, the virtual figure of the Pregnant Teenager is fathered by the State, as product of its official discourses, in the same movement as the State makes itself surrogate for the actual father. It is an act of incest wherein Freud returns as a commanding virtuality, an Oedipus Rex.

Third, this convolution of roles and attributions carries within it a further substitution, because it is 'pregnancy' that stands in for sex, and encapsulates the central motivation for sex education. In so doing it registers both of these as impurities (Douglas 1984) that must be addressed for the sake of future generations. The impetus for sex education is channelled through the pathology of the 'pregnant teenager' as essentially a remedial, inhibitive and heterosexual education. Thus the initial RIPPLE concern for sex education as a 'relationship issue' is medicalized and pathologised by the Medical Research Council's press release: 'Sex education taught by pupils – a new approach to tackling pregnancy and infection'. Sex Education becomes a reductive synecdoche for 'health', 'safety', 'disease' and even 'sex trauma' (Harrison 2000, Tabberer et al 2000:41, Furedi 2004: 79). Current 'sex education' in England and its associated research therefore typically set out to address and measure the following: 'rates of unprotected sexual intercourse, unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and [last and least, our interjection] the quality of young people's sexual relationships' (Strange et al 2003: 202)⁸.

Finally, we note the recurrent nature of these 'crises' in morality. As indeed Kellogg et al noted as long ago as 1975, the arguments are unchanged: '..the fear that access to contraceptive information will promote promiscuous sex relations..' (Kellogg et al 1975: 52), the recurrent struggle between 'progressives' and 'conservatives' (1975: 27), and the opposition of many churches.⁹ Frankham (2006) notes a similar ambivalence in parental strategies. Despite intentions to be 'open' about sex, or at least more open than their parents seemed, parents tend to provide highly constrained and constraining versions of sex, lest too much information translates into too much interest. As Hampshire & Lewis currently note, '..most recent arguments have tended to recycle arguments that were first articulated in the late 1960s and 1970s' (2004: 310, see also Carol 1983). It would be premature, however, to see such repetition simply as part of the 'problem'. In its iterability, in its recurrent failures and panics may lie a certain functionality, a kind of 'solution': '..it is in order to function that a social machine must not function well' (Deleuze & Guattari 1977: 151, their emphasis). The state, in moral Keynesian mode, seeks to limit the effects of the market-led pornography and sexualisation it elsewhere licenses or condones. The Social Exclusion Unit demurely refers to these contradictions as 'mixed messages' (1999:7). Thus, at the same time, the morality of 'family values' can be promoted in a society where '..nothing has replaced the identity status of girls as bodies that men can trade for money' (Irigaray 1994: 61, Thomson 2004). Indeed the need for both morality and immorality to combine synergistically may express a definition of a

masculine culture where 'possessing virgins [...] found[s] the symbolic order of [the] culture' (Irigaray 1993: 74). Purity and impurity must simultaneously contain and contest each other, resulting in an impasse whereby sex education can just as readily be presented as a scandalous excess and betrayal of children's innocence, as it can as an introduction that is too little and too late at the same time as it is too much, too soon. The result of this impasse is well illustrated by government policy as explicated by the relevant agency:

'Primary schools in England are required by law to have a policy on sex education (though this does not mean that they have to teach it): the policy could be not to do so' (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999: 37, their stress).

Thus, woven through the apparent incontrovertibilities of statistics, the Pregnant Teenager is presented as a target for Official Sex, and as a measurable object for Official Science. As a 'tabloidisation' (Kingori et al 2004: 122) the debate has the 'objective' appearance of certainty; clearly defined, neatly tabulated, and objectively displayed. Against such an apparently simple and clear account, we have tried to pose versions of sex, sex education, and especially the 'pregnant teenager', as a knot of contradictory ideological entanglements. The State periodically takes this 'pregnant teenager', as Errant Daughter, from the margin into the centre of political discourse – in order to be displayed as a sacrificial virtual example and object of national shame. The Pregnant Teenager represents danger (as demonised) as well as purity (as a cautionary tale), thus performing an underlying madonna/whore dichotomy within the parameters of audit discourse and its mediatised expression¹⁰. Our account posits the 'pregnant teenager' as a highly complex ritual object, part pharmakon, part auditable object. As such, it is important that it should be neither too numerous nor too powerful. Bonell points out that the concern used to be for 'unmarried mums' but there is a 'decreasing political acceptability of explicitly problematizing unmarried mothers' (2004: 256). In other words, you can only marginalize and pathologize the outsider. The contemporary number of 'unmarried mums' (and hence unmarried votes) is far too high for such scapegoating. Hence the state needs the problem to be sufficiently insubstantial in empirical terms for it to be suitable for this sort of ritual inflation: small problems make the best crises.

'In the present case, however, the clear is precisely the confused; it is confused in so far as it is clear' (Deleuze 1994: 253).

We hope that it is now possible to see that when Butler (1993:10) writes that a key question is: 'Through what regulatory norms is sex itself materialized?' we will want to add to her question: 'And how is it virtualised?' That virtualization influences, as we have argued, the 'problematization of sex education itself' (Hampshire & Lewis, 2004: 310).

Wittingly or unwittingly, the English government, through its accountability and improvement practices has identified a 'problem'. We have tried to show that process as being much more than the innocent identification of statistics that objectively indicate a problem, set it in international perspective, and create targets to redress it. Before inquiring into such redress and the role of educational research in its amelioration, it is helpful to address the questions 'why this, why now?' We do so only in passing and refer readers to the instructive history offered by Bonell and others (cf Hampshire & Lewis 2004, Kellogg et al 1975). It seems that in 1974 the *Spectator* identified 'one of the most savagely damaging lobbies a society has ever had to confront', a danger so great that it might 'destroy the family' (Hampshire & Lewis 2004: 302, 300) The lobby they had in mind was the 'sex education' lobby, whose educative ambitions were such a goad to promiscuity. As a neoconservative journal, it supported

Thatcherite family values, as it does today¹¹. Such has been the success of this media campaign over the years, that so-called progressive attitudes to sex education and to sexual mores more generally are widely decried in the - often pornographic - media and loudly denounced by most politicians. The result has been an infantilisation of educational discourses about sex, so that government-funded research already has its hands tied (and an orange stuck in its mouth) by government/media definitions of both problem and solution. Official Sex, we might conclude, is by definition perverse. Its 'politicization of sex' (Hampshire & Lewis 2004: 298) is presumably underwritten by deeper cultural concerns about the 'dangers' of sexual knowledge and desire, especially as expressed by the young, and even more so by the female young. This is 'panic sex' (Kroker 1988: 10), seeking to 'quell sexual desire' and suppress the 'exploration of desire and pleasure as part of sexuality' (Allen 2004: 154). As Pollitt (2005: 5) argues: '[s]ensible people continually point out that contraception is the best way to prevent abortion; logically anti-choicers ought to be the pill's most fervent champions. That they refuse to join hands with pro-choicers to support birth control and fact-based sex education shows that their real target is not abortion but modern roles for women, sexual freedom, perhaps even sex itself'.

The problem/solution matrix, promoted by government and acquiesced to by complicit researchers (we too have been there), can be expressed and questioned thus: 'are teenage pregnancy rates the problem to which effective sex education is the solution?' Gilles Deleuze discusses the relation of problem to solution in Difference and Repetition. He posits the question of the question as 'the genesis of the act of thinking and concludes that we need to 'participate in the fabrication of problems' (1968: 158) lest we end up in 'stupidity [...] the faculty of false problems' (1968: 159)¹². We will later return to the problem-solution matrix as an overall 'constellation' of state concerns and interventions (Youdell 2005: 252).

fabricating the problem-solution matrix

Our example of 'solution-rendering', as we earlier called it, is taken from research published by the RIPPLE project (Randomised Intervention of Pupil Peer-led Sex Education). It is chosen for two different sorts of reason. First, it addresses solutions to the above problems of sex and sex education: it is Official Science addressing Official Sex. Second, it is an example of a kind of quantitative research that is increasingly being promoted by governments (UK and US in particular) as a 'scientific' approach to educational research (Lather 2004b). We aim to examine aspects of the 'solution' as well as the research quality of its production, relating both back to the relation of 'problem' and methods that are *a priori* channelled towards the rhetorics of 'what works?'

1. the problem-as-given

Most of the published accounts of the RIPPLE project repeat some version of the government mantra about social exclusion, or the UK concern that teenage pregnancy rates are the highest in Western Europe, that sexually transmitted infections are rising, and the age of first sex falling (eg Stephenson et al 2004). The solution is hypothesized to be improving sex education, in RIPPLE's case by devising peer-led sex education strategies and comparing effectiveness with a control group of conventional teacher-led sex education provision. Such effectiveness has a number of indicators but the 'primary outcome' at the end of the research will be the 'cumulative incidence of termination of pregnancy by 19-20 years' (Stephenson et al 2004: 340). Official Science picks up the problem as defined by Official Sex and sets off in search for Best Practice, though it is interesting that the project acronym coyly elides the 'S' for Sex. Thus

far, they conclude that peer-led sex education is a 'promising way forward' (Medical Research Council press release, 23 July 2004). There is an obvious universalism in this quest, a one-size-fits-all assumption that is only lightly hedged around in the RIPPLE accounts. The unspoken social theorem is: if all the world did peer-led sex education 'teenage pregnancy' would decrease.

If we look elsewhere in RIPPLE, the conceptual doubts grow. In Bonell et al we are told that the research 'develops hypotheses on the relation between socio-economic and educational dimensions of social exclusion by examining whether dislike of school and socio-economic disadvantage are associated with cognitive/risk measures.' (Bonell et al 2003: 871). Two major concepts are operationalised in this study. Added together, they make a third. The first is the notion of 'alienation from education'. The second is the idea of 'socio-economic disadvantage'. The third is 'social exclusion', to which 'teenage pregnancy' may contribute. But when we look behind the statistics, we find that the indicator of 'disadvantage' is solely 'self-reported housing tenure' (2003: 872). Those pupils reporting that they lived in rented accommodation were counted as 'disadvantaged', the rest not. 12% of respondents didn't know and so were excluded. On what definition of 'science' can such a reduction be justified? As for 'alienation from education', there is a slippage from 'school' to 'education', and the revelation that 'alienation', a powerful but contested notion in sociological literature (they cite but do not discuss Willis's notion, 1977), is based on a single question – 'do you like school?' To be exact those who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement 'I like school' were 'alienated from education', the rest not. In this one-stop tick-box sociology the notion of 'social exclusion' is treated as the unproblematic adding up and correlating of the first two 'concepts', a very dubious manoeuvre. In effect, the researchers buy the government's rhetoric of the problem and the targeted solution. They aim to connect these two things through a statistical performance which founds their claims to 'science'. But such extreme reductionism and determinism cannot amount to a secure base on which to build comparisons, however sophisticated the statistical superstructure. It is also interesting how the broad, conceptual and contested assumptions about 'alienation', 'disadvantage', and 'exclusion' come to rest on the tiny props of two questions answered in class by pupils, in social contexts that were very different, where not everyone responded, or responded under the same conditions, or even took the task seriously – as the same group of researchers elsewhere acknowledge (Strange et al 2002). Then that reductionism is followed by a remarkable inflationism, with the authors concluding that '..alienation from education may be a particularly important dimension of exclusion in the determination of teenage pregnancy' (Bonell et al 2003: 876, our stresses). Such a move then makes schools liable for pregnancy (the Missing Father!), and perhaps explains the recent astonishing moves of the Department of Health in proposing that league tables of teen pregnancies per school catchment might be a 'lever for change'. (Telegraph 29. 10. 05).

At any rate, we've already seen how complicated the notion of 'teenage pregnancy' is, for all its apparent self-evidence. Now we can see how simplistic and wildly extrapolative is the inflation of like/dislike school, and rent/own in relation to fattening up 'concepts' such as alienation and disadvantage for the turkey of 'social exclusion'. The statistics in the middle are irrelevant: the argument begins and ends in nonsense.

2. number-bending

RIPPLE offer a table of results as objective indicators of research outcomes. It reports the results of an extensive survey of secondary school pupils on their preferences in relation to the organisation of sex education in school:

TABLE 1. Numbers (%) of boys and girls who reported that they would prefer their sex education in single-sex or mixed –sex classes (n= 1595 girls and 1752 boys)

	Girls(%)	Boys (%)
Single sex	527 (34)	263 (17)
Mixed sex	634 (41)	1033 (65)
Both	378 (25)	298 (19)

The researchers concluded that '[a]nalysis of the data ... showed that the majority of the girls and about 1/3rd of the boys, would like some or all of their sex education to be delivered in single-sex groups' (Strange et al 2003: 201, our stress). Their article in The Lancet is more specific, in one sense, but then slips to a more partial summary. Here, they report that 54.9% of the girls and 35.5% of the boys 'would have liked some or all of their sex education to be in single sex groups' (Stephenson et al 2004: 343). Later in the piece, the 'some or all' qualifier disappears: 'Sex education failed to meet the needs of some pupils – many (our stress) wanted SRE to be delivered in single sex groups' (345). 'Many' is not usually deployed as a descriptor of a minority, ie 34% of girls and 17% of boys¹³. We speculate that the 'many' may relate to a felt need to explain why sex education currently seems not to be 'working' in either control or intervention groups. The outcomes are acknowledged to be 'generally modest' (345). Based on previous work (Frankham 1998), we suggest this may be explained by the similarities between the 'intervention' and the 'control' approaches to sex education in terms of objectives and content - protection from unwanted pregnancy and STIs predominates (2004: 339). These sessions may have been peer-'delivered', but they were designed by adults, with adult concerns in mind. Perhaps both groups got the 'placebo'.

On the basis of the same figures in the table, the research could also have 'analysed' the data very differently. Playing the 'some or all' game from the other end we can equally argue that: '2/3^{rds} (66%) of the girls and more than 3/4^{ths} (84%) of the boys would like some or all of their sex education to be delivered in mixed-sex groups' (our stress). The conclusion is unavoidable. When the researchers went on to claim that '[t]he views of young people (...) clearly endorse the call (...) for more sex education with girls to be delivered in single-sex groups' (2003:213), they were clearly wrong. Indeed, if both statements about percentages wanting single-sex or mixed-sex teaching are admissible and yet contradictory then logically neither can be said to be true.

The implications for such research 'findings' in a policy context of 'what works?' are clearly dangerous. This kind of research is designed to produce a decisionistic text. Do this? Or that? It offers 'answers' to 'problems', and careless policy-makers could easily be deceived into thinking that complicated questions had been satisfactorily if expensively resolved.¹⁴ Instead, a prejudicial arithmetic serves a conclusion that the authors may already have had in mind.

3. rhetorical gerrymandering

Was there evidence that such prejudices were otherwise evident in the research texts? We turn now to a brief deconstruction of some aspects of the Gender & Education article, and suggest a kind of rhetorical gerrymandering.

The research team want to base their research on the 'expressed needs' of young people rather than the normative definitions of need produced by researchers and experts (Forrest et al 2004: 338). One of the authors has written elsewhere about the need to 'allow the voices of research participants to be heard above the (generally) louder voice of the researcher's own' (Oakley 2000: 21). Yet they happily 're-interpret' those expressed needs into normative definitions when it suits their argument. The qualitative data from focus group discussions is interpreted to suggest that whatever girls and boys say about single-sex and mixed-sex classes, their reported experiences would really suggest that single-sex provision would better suit the girls. Here are examples of that privileging of researcher interpretation over pupil voice. 'Although both boys and girls described potential advantages of working with the opposite sex in mixed-sex groups, these tended not to reflect their experiences' (2003: 206, our stress). Although boys 'were more positive than girls about having sex education in mixed-sex classes, their descriptions of mixed-sex classes were mostly very negative' (2003: 205, our stress). In both cases the 'voices' were mistaken. The researchers knew better. In addition, views regarded by the researchers as 'surprising' (2003: 211) were explained away via post-hoc rationalisation. For example, a majority of girls had opted for some or all of 'mixed' classes. This was rationalised in the following terms: '..girls are willing to compromise their own needs in order to create classroom conditions that will be of benefit to boys.' No evidence for this essentialist claim was given. A moralizing tone was also adopted: 'In general, boys did not take responsibility for classroom disruption' (206). This tone was even strengthened a few pages later, by which time 'none' of the boys would take that responsibility (211).

It is also interesting to see how gender differentiation is worked up in the researchers' analysis. The boys are held to perform stereotypically, 'to conform to particular forms of (heterosexual) masculinity' (211). The girls, by contrast, 'talk more openly and focus on informational issues': a gender-neutral assumption. They were naturally inclined to want information, avoid joking, and be sensible. The analysis then develops a dichotomy whereby a gender differentiation is established between boys and girls:

[male/female]

joking/serious
 disruptive/attentive
 sexist/neutral
 hurting/damaged
 (etc)

There is a neglect of data that undermines the simple dichotomy, as when boys do reflect critically on their behaviour, on the difficulties of sex education lessons, and the psychology behind the problem: '..some people [boys] are too scared so they cover that up by being noisy and disrupt the class'. The essentialist dichotomy, of course, is performative: it helps construct the need for separate sex education of the sexes. An example of this kind of RIPPLE reading of the boys' contributions can be seen in the following extract:

[the topic is about getting pregnant]

'G[irl]: They haven't got so much to worry about, have they?

[Interviewer]: Do you think that's true, boys?

B[oy]: No.

G: No, but you don't have to get pregnant. If you get caught being pregnant, then you gonna get..

G: Yeah, in serious trouble.

B: We're going to get in trouble.

G: Not as much trouble as us, because just think if we hadn't had the baby...we're not allowed the baby, we've got to have an abortion or something like that' (209)

The passage is interesting to us because it encapsulates an aspect of our interpretation of the Pregnant Teenager. The girls mark the space of the Missing Father who 'doesn't have to get pregnant'. Equally the boy resists that expulsion – 'We're going to get into trouble'. The girls evaluate the different degrees of 'trouble' involved. The boy's contribution to this discussion is dismissed by the RIPPLE researchers as merely 'reactive', its motivation being 'to interject in order to disagree' (209). Notions of voice were therefore invoked, differentially listened to, and sometimes muffled.

Overall, a strange set of displacements is evident in relation to 'pupil voice'. The authors want to hear what young people have to say, via survey and focus group. When the discussions suggest that the survey results did not 'really' reflect what they ought to have said, ie mixed sex sex education is quite difficult in all sorts of ways – they want both to deny the context within which this data was generated, and then deny the facts of the survey. They don't, then, take the figures as reflecting what young people 'really think' and they engage in a naïve reporting of the girls' voices when it suits their arguments as if voices can somehow communicate an unmediated, context-neutral 'truth'.

The interpretations we have made above suggest that the researchers knew the answers they were looking for. Added to the manipulation of the table, it seemed that an objective, 'scientific' approach was more of a masquerade than the 'reality' it purported to be¹⁵. Together, these moves perhaps constitute a version of what Spanier has called 'scientific sexism' (Spanier 1991:330). There were, therefore, elements of the 'science' in these accounts that expressed reductionism, determinism, essentialism, and some unduly selective presentation of the figures and their meanings. We do not wish to claim that such impurities are entirely avoidable in any inquiry or paradigm, but the official discourse on educational research as a 'new science' makes just such claims on the basis of an objectivity and a scientific comparability that, as we've seen in this instance, turns out to be problematic in places, prejudicial in others, and absurd in some. All these reductive and simplifying moves may be unavoidable for research that accepts government definitions and targets as given.

'sciening' educational research

'Driven by the performance goals inherent in standards-based reforms, they seek a working consensus on the challenges confronting education, on what works in what contexts and what doesn't, and on why what works does work. Simply put, they seek trustworthy, scientific evidence on which to base decisions about education' (Shavelson & Towne 2002:22)

Finally, some more general thoughts about the relation of sex, science and educational research. In *The Disorder of Things*, Dupré has argued against what he takes to be the essentialism, determinism and reductionism with which certain crude versions of 'Science'

invest thinking about social meanings. He identifies 'scientism' and 'mathematicism' as 'a mystifying veneer [which] will sometimes serve to conceal the banality of what is offered as scientific wisdom' (1993:224). He identifies a persistent Cartesianism in attempts to extend 'so-called scientific thinking into the Social', although his targets are different from ours in this paper – he had in mind the 'neuro-Cartesianism' of brain science and socio-biology. Coming from a very different philosophical tradition, Deleuze has made similar criticisms, especially against a normative science based on the philosophical notion of the Same. His basic argument is against forms of question construction as well as the search for universalistic and simplistic solutions that suppress the nature of differences. Offering a 'post-realist' (ir)resolution, Lather combines critical social science with elements of poststructuralist and late realist thinking, and also inveighs against the simplistic scientism that invests the sorts of research we have been criticising (Lather 2004a, b)¹⁶. The research we have examined can be criticised from all those perspectives, in terms of constructing problems, rendering solutions, as well as producing the requisite eureka of 'what works?'

The 'problem' and the 'solution' of sex education in relation to social ills such as 'teenage pregnancy rates' are caught in a pseudo-scientific frame. MacLure describes that current movement as characterised by a 'rage for clarity, transparency and certainty of outcomes' (MacLure 2005: 394). The resurrection of such positivistic approaches as 'Best Science', despite all the unanswered criticisms that led to its first demise in the 1960s and 70s, constitute a kind of Zombie Positivism, feeding in this case on the virtual body of the 'Pregnant Teenager'. Far from being a set of robust comparisons of real outcomes, the surface rhetorics, on which media and populist accounts rely, disguise a whole series of substitutions, displacements, condensations and antagonisms – the Errant Daughter, the Missing Father, the State as Father, the odd synergy of pornography and morality in mobilising 'concern', and so on. That last point is so culturally familiar and yet neglected that it bears exemplification. The Sunday Mirror (29.8.05) portrayed 'sickening scenes' of holiday debauchery by young Brits, complete with 11 exposed nipples, nude photographs of simulated sex and the demure apology that much was 'too explicit to show'. Morality, of course, was not neglected: 'what would their parents say?' Titillation and tuttilation combined. That 'tits 'n' tuts' dynamic is necessary to the recurrence of both problem and solution, especially in that it suppresses history in favour of a certain version of narrow (im)morality, in a kind of statistical neo-Victorianism that constructs the Pregnant Teenager as a pharmakon that is both madonna and whore¹⁷. In particular, that neo-Victorianism is caught in the tensions between a largely pornographic media and its 'economy of titillation' and a prudish if hypocritical official morality to which media and politicians also subscribe (Irigaray 1994: ix). In that sense, the shenanigans at the Spectator that we earlier reported are emblematic rather than trivially amusing. Each immoral/moral moment is necessary to the dynamic of the other. In this way, the definition of the problem, the stipulation of the solution, and the a priori identification of the methodology that will determine 'effectiveness' provide a kind of discursive veneer wherein oversimplification, reduction and determinism can be brought to play both in order to advocate a 'rational' response to the 'crisis' and to ensure that less comfortable options are excluded (eg: acknowledging the tight and enduring correlation between poverty and teen pregnancy). Such an epistemology seeks both to fix problem and solution in simple linear associations, and to propel that matrix through a series of unacknowledged recurrences as manifestations of 'panic' (Hall 1980), 'hysteria' (Stronach & Morris 1994), 'rage' (MacLure 2004) and 'frenzy' (Lather 2004a). These are all affects of the scapegoating ritual.

In addition, the surface lamination of problem and solution depends on the suppression or erasure of a whole range of discrepant 'facts of life' and motivations. The impregnating

teenager largely disappears. So too does any discourse on sex/sex education/ pregnancy as positive and desirable. 'Sex' becomes 'pregnancy', with a few gestures in the direction of 'positive relationships' – usually heavily skewed towards 'how to say no'. And Teenage Pregnancy becomes an economic as well as a moral concern, a matter of wasted productivity in an age when 'societies and economies have become ever more dependent on skills and knowledge' (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999: 7). In New Labour rhetorics the ultimate immorality is to appear to be unproductive. What is performed in these various mobilisations is a kind of virtual 'bio-power' (Foucault 1970) whereby the state can represent itself (to itself as much as to others) as organising 'population and welfare for the sake of increased force and productivity' (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1986: 8). Thus the discursive veneer makes invisible a series of contesting discourses and explanations. Indeed, such is the simplicity of the schema that, here as elsewhere, it is the emic power of international league tables (Stronach 1999) that determine the moral scale of the 'problem' (twice as much as..) and the urgency of a 'solution' (halved by..). These normative scales constitute a new auditable morality, expressed within the rubrics of 'effective' education, and expressible as league tables – even, as we saw, for Teen Pregnancy rates.

Our argument has been that this statistically constructed morality is highly patriarchal in its presentations of problem and solution, and it is a deep irony that the fabricating of 'solutions' within this frame (eg by Strange et al) should presume itself to be 'feminist' and emancipatory (see Lather 2004b). In effect, 'sex education' becomes an impossible object, forever rehearsing its own postponement – as the sexual act, the sexual relationship - in a series of paradoxical educational events that exhibit, inhibit and prohibit its subject matter¹⁸. Little wonder that it 'does not work' since it is far from clear what it is supposed to be doing, educationally speaking. Its essentially recursive nature also ensures that educational debate on this subject – and many others caught in the media-state complicity – is in the UK a 'stuck discourse'.¹⁹

But we wish to end on a different and more culturally specific note. It seems that the research/policy discourse we have been interrogating, with research an acquiescent female partner (no Errant Daughter, she) to the dominant male of government, offers an instructive series of defining characteristics. As an example of 'scientism' it exhibited:

1. gestures imitative of Science, especially through a statistically validated normativity, invoked in order to provide 'correct' answers based on simplistic questions that were political 'givens' (Hayek 1952, Stenmark 2001).
2. 'mathematicism' as a validating cover, a manifestation of Dupré's 'fetishistic reverence' (1993: 167), and therefore the apparition of the 'robust' findings of a 'hard' science. It also related to a 'new kind of medicine [which] made subjectively reportable states, such as pleasure, of relatively little scientific interest'. Pleasure and desire play no part in its therapeutic moves (Laqueur 1990: 188, Furedi 2004).
3. educational research posited as a future Science, a way forward that is part of a future fantasy of the Grand March of Science, alleged to be achieved in Medicine, and increasingly powerful in Nursing, Social Work/Care and Education. This is 'redemptive scientism' at last (Stenmark 2001, Oakley 2000, Lather 2004b).
4. an imperialistic nature, dismissive of alternatives and criticisms, what Arendt called 'a dogmatic absolutizing of a special area' (1970: 124); as well as a willingness to let power decide arguments²⁰, in addition to determining what will count as 'problems' and how their 'solutions' ought properly to be sought.

5. an aspect of 'shoddy production,' as we have seen, in terms of the 'solution' we have examined. Yet at the same time, an assertion of the formulaic, of production over craft, of science over subjectivity.
6. a matter of public sentimentality, promoted by the 'tabloidisation' of the discourse, and its reduction to scare stories, moral panics and policy hysterias (Kingori et al 2004: 122, Stronach and Morris 1994). And also the romanticism of a 'peer-led' initiative in which the young learn to save themselves.

All of this is a denial of what Kundera called in relation to social and political life in general, 'shit' (1984: 243). He meant by that the untidiness and uncertainty of the social, its indetermination and lack of hygiene, order, and predictability. Its serendipity. But we can offer some conceptual purchase on this disorder. The constellation of these six factors is familiar to a certain sort of aesthetic – 'enchanted by the consonance of [its] own system' (Arendt 1970: 123). 'What works?' is a rendering of complicated questions into oversimplifications and a schooling of answers to decisionistic banalities. At the same time these reductions can be paraded as both 'Science' and the most absolute common sense, even if that is no sense at all. They constitute the 'relation of pseudo-science to science in the modern mass age' (1970:122). As Scruton, Arendt, Greenber, Kundera and Adorno would all attest, from across a broad political spectrum, these features listed above are defining characteristics of kitsch rather than science. What we have been examining, then, is educational research as 'scientific' kitsch. This new Education Research of Science (EROS, of course) constructs reality in a problem/solution matrix wherein sex has to be represented as 'parodic [...] beyond the ethical subject in relation to its sexual conduct to a little sign-slide between kitsch and decay' (Kroker & Kroker 1988:96, their stress). As Lyotard noted a quarter of a century ago (1979), such an ambition towards 'realism' 'always stands somewhere between academicism and kitsch' and reflects an absurd demand for 'correct' images, 'correct narratives' - a demand for 'reality' that is always prefaced by an insistence on 'unity, simplicity, communicability etc' (Lyotard 1986:75). And, in 2005, here we still are²¹.

Finally, how are we to respond to the emergence of educational research as scientific kitsch? We need to see both the funny and the serious side of this social phenomenon, and it is for this reason that we earlier labelled its odd combination of fascism and farce, 'farscism' (Stronach 2002). Kundera illustrates this kind of totalitarian kitsch in his early writings on communist Czechoslovakia:

'Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says 'How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!' (1984: 244)

Let our first tear say: 'How nice to know what works!' And the second one say: 'How nice to be seen to make a Science of Education available to all!'²²

As Kundera concludes: 'It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch'. That is, the fantasy of a simple universalism available as Best Practice for Virtual Outcomes which are, in this instance, improvements in 'teen pregnancy' international league table positions. But perhaps the last word on the new kitsch science should be left to Oscar Wilde, and his epitaph for the death of the unfortunate heroine in The Old Curiosity Shop²³.

'A man needs a heart of stone not to laugh at the death of Little Nell'

.....

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Table 1

Since the 1950s, the US teen birthrate has declined while the proportion of teen births that are nonmarital has increased

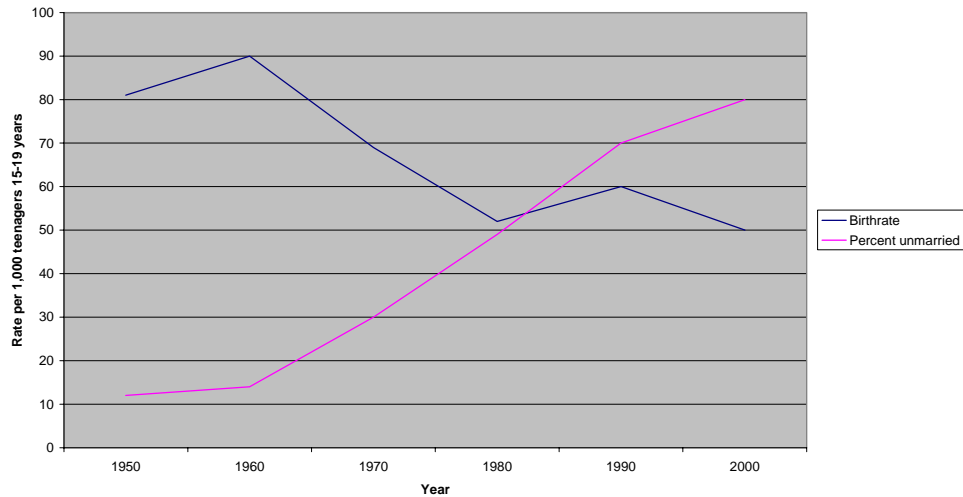
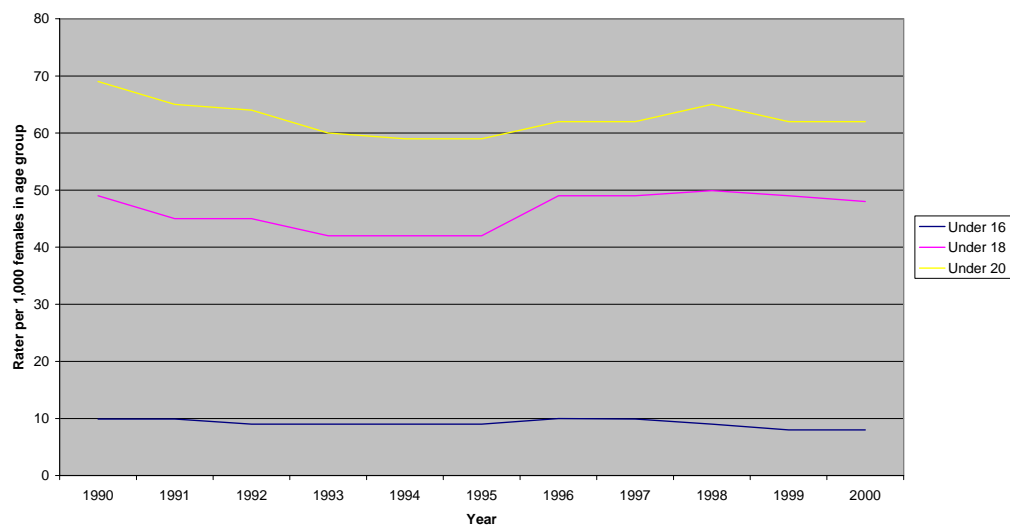


Table 2

Conception rates for female adolescents aged under 16, 18 and 20 years within/outside marriage, England and Wales



Notes

¹ This article is of course a polemic, and is written as such. We intend the tone to be provocative rather than derisive, humorous rather than mocking. These alternatives are sometimes ambivalent. For example, one reviewer objected to the phrase 'one stop, tick-box sociology' as sarcastic. Would that it were so – the 'sociology' invoked the notion of 'alienation'. The validity of that concept rested on the answer to one question [and so 'one stop'], about liking school. The response required was yes/no [and so 'tick box']: sadly, our rendering was descriptive rather than polemical. We would wish to emphasize that our criticisms are not directed at the authors we have negatively cited, but at what we claim to be their specific misuse of evidence and argument.

²The research consisted of a national evaluation of interagency initiatives designed to address (amongst other things) rates of teenage pregnancy by offering improved sex and health education in primary schools. The evaluation reported in 2003 (Stark et al 2003).

³ For example, ‘School for Sex’, Sunday Times 16th April 2004; ‘Oral sex lessons to cut rates of teenage pregnancy’, Observer 9th May, 2004; ‘School. For sex’, Sunday Times 16th May, 2004; ‘Schools fail to hold back surge of sexual diseases’, Observer 25th July 2004; ‘Increase in teenage pregnancies’, Guardian 12th November 2004; ‘Abortions for under-15s top 1000’, Sunday Times 20th February 2005; ‘If we leave sex education to parents alone, many teenagers will suffer,’ Observer 29th May 2005; ‘Teenage kicks’, Observer 14th August 2005; ‘Hannah White gave birth to a baby in the middle of her GCSEs’ Guardian 17th September 2005.

⁴ For the same sorts of moral panic concerns re South Africa, see Macleod 1999. For a similar scepticism about the statistical evidence see also Burghes and Brown (1995).

⁵ This paper in an earlier form was a keynote address to the British Educational Research Association conference, Manchester 2004. A questioner criticised such representations as ignoring the actual individual tragedies that might lie behind these statistics. But this aspect of the critique is not directed at individuals at all: it looks at and criticises the statistical and symbolical manipulation that can be skewed towards a declaration of ‘moral panic’ or a prompt to ‘policy hysteria’. It is interested in how government and media ‘work up’ such a generalised political response. Our concern is not teenage pregnancy as such, but ‘teenage pregnancy’ as an official construct of government and media.

⁶ Edwards et al use the notion of ‘fabrication’ to acknowledge that discourse is always a rhetorical achievement. We suspect that they would regard our use of that term in this article to be more ‘ideological’ than they would desire, and they would be right.

⁷ The Sun, 23rd May, 2005.

⁸ The antiquity of these fears, according to Foucault, is impressive. Galen, in his tract ‘On the usefulness of the parts of the body’ at least asked a positive question about sex and sex education: ‘Why is a very great pleasure coupled with the exercise of the generative parts?’ (cited Foucault 1990: 107).

⁹ They cite St Anthony, as quoted by Pope Pius XI in 1929, not without what seems a disguised relish: ‘So great is our misery and our disposition to sin that.. a good father, when talking to his son on a matter of such insidiousness, should be mindful not to go into details.. so as not to inflame the fire in the innocent and tender heart of the child instead of extinguishing it’ (cited p35).

¹⁰ If that seems too much, consider the Guardian report of 17th September 2005. Paula [mother] recalls visiting a chemist with her [pregnant] daughter in school uniform, and seeing how badly she was treated by the assistant, “ That’s when I realised just what a bad press teenage mums get”.

¹¹ Non-UK readers might wish to note that the recent past editor of the *Spectator*, Boris Johnson MP, had to resign as editor following publicity about an affair, concerning which he had lied to the then (2004) Conservative leader. Meanwhile one of the owners confessed to an affair with the then Home Secretary, David Blunkett, who eventually had to resign. Unusually, Blunkett claimed paternity of at least one of the owner’s children. Perhaps literalising the notion of the State as Father? Meanwhile again, the same owner was discovered to have had a further affair with a married journalist for the paper, the well-known columnist Simon Hoggart. It is clear, then, why the *Spectator* is interested in sex, but less clear where the family values come in. (The above, of course, is based on a culling of media accounts for whose truths we cannot vouch.)

¹² Maggie MacLure has also criticised EPPI-style reviewing as ‘clarity bordering on stupidity’ (2004)

¹³ We pointed out these problems to the editors of Gender and Education and The Lancet. The editors of Gender and Education decided that since the rebuttal was already printed in Research Intelligence they would not carry it in their journal. This seemed to us reasonable. The Lancet did not respond.

¹⁴ These interpretations were contested by S.Gorard in *Research Intelligence*, 89, 2004: 9 – 10. His principal argument in relation to the above was that the call for more single-sex education was justified, since presumably all teaching was mixed-sex. The article makes it clear that there was single-sex teaching as well. The response (Stronach 2004) agreed that it ‘would be possible [...] to work out whether students wanted more single-sex education than they currently got, but that was not a line explored by the [Strange et al] article, and therefore neither was it by myself. I sought merely to deny that the table ‘showed’ what the authors claimed.’

¹⁵ As was made clear in the BERA plenary presentation on which this account builds, we offer these criticisms of these specific articles, and make no comment on the qualities of the rest of the RIPPLE study. No doubt, a broader investigation of RIPPLE might seem to be necessary, given the weaknesses reported here, but that is not our current purpose.

¹⁶ These are not uncommon criticisms. Hannah Arendt made a parallel attack on ‘pseudo-science’ (1970: 122). De Certeau offers similar criticism, although of course both were criticising ‘positivism’ first time round: ‘The law, which is given in numbers and data (that is, fabricated by technicians), but presented as the manifestation of the ultimate authority, the ‘real’, constitutes our new orthodoxy, an immense discourse of the order of things’ (1986: 207).

¹⁷ The virgin/whore dilemma is noted by Youdell (2005) in her empirical study of secondary school female students, for whom ‘reputation’ is a central issue.

¹⁸ An example of that ‘prohibition’: we produced a case study for the Department of Health. It portrayed explicit but sensibly handled sex education for 10 year olds. An aspect of the worksheet was included in the study: it was a sketch of an ejaculating erect penis. The Department decided it could not have such a drawing on its website. Nor indeed could the words ‘erect penis’ penetrate the electronic firewalls of the Teenage Pregnancy Unit. We were told: ‘what would happen if the media got hold of it?’ (fieldnote)

¹⁹ We have written elsewhere about the nature of such ‘stuck discourses’ in educational debate. See Stronach, Stark et al 2002 on the nature of contemporary professionalism.

²⁰ For example David Gough of the EPPI Centre replied to criticisms such as the above, and those made elsewhere and separately by MacLure and Torrance, with the threat of quasi-legal action. The free and open debate that ought to characterise research – and science – is quickly subordinated to more coercive strategies, ‘totalitarian’ in effect (Kundera 1984: 245).

²¹ It is worth reminding ourselves of Lyotard’s prescience: ‘The decision makers, however, attempt to manage these clouds of sociality according to input/output matrices, following a logic which implies that their elements are commensurable and that the whole is determinable. They allocate our lives for the growth of power. In matters of social justice and of scientific truth alike, the legitimization of that power is based on its optimising the system’s performance – efficiency. The application of this criterion to all of our games entails a certain level of terror, whether soft or hard: be operational (that is commensurable) or disappear’ (Lyotard 1986: xxiv). Whether we should solemnise such totalising farce with the descriptor of ‘soft terror’ is another matter.

²² The Teacher Training Agency in England has a manager called Head of Effective Practices. In common with most such government agencies in the UK, the TTA is being renamed and rebadged at the moment. It will be called the Teacher Development Agency.

²³ Cited by Roger Scruton (accessed 6/8/04 at www.city-journal.org)