

# Sex Education: Sexuality, Society and Learning

## *Audio Interview with Michael Reiss, Editor*

### **Interview Transcript**

#### **1. How would you describe your journal? What is it about, in a nutshell, and who is it aimed at?**

The journal *Sex Education* is meant to be read by anybody who's got a real interest, professional or academic, in, obviously, the field of sex education, mostly academics. And the phrase sex education is understood pretty widely so it's anybody working with, whether it's school sex education or whether it's anything to do with sex and sexualities, relationships, even issues to do with gender, provided they in some way connect with issues to do with sex and sexualities.

#### **2. What do you see as the journal's aims?**

At one level, the journal's aims, like any academic journal, are to publish really good articles, mostly by academics, which get read, cited, disseminated and, build up the whole body of knowledge. It's also something to do with pulling together a field, because there are quite a lot of people who work in this area who might not always think of themselves as being in the same community as others. For example, there's a quite small number of people who work on issues to do with the history of sex and the history of sex education, and we accept those sorts of papers and they therefore fit in along with a quite large number of people who are doing empirical studies, trying to develop programmes of sex education, often in schools or colleges.

#### **3. Do you see your journal focussing on any particular areas of sex education?**

When the journal *Sex Education* was set up, we deliberately decided, the publisher, Taylor & Francis and myself, that we wanted it to be very broad based in terms of academic disciplines. So it is meant to appeal to psychologists, to sociologists, to philosophers, to people who basically just work empirically in curriculum development, to a wide range. It's not meant to allow itself to be pigeon-holed as being predominantly of interest, one part or another part of the whole area. It's obviously an international journal. A lot of effort went in the early issues to encouraging people outside of the UK, and my immediate contact internationally, to submit. Once that gets going it becomes self-perpetuating.

#### **4. Can you give us an idea of the range of issues and concerns that the journal addresses, or deals with, or explores at least?**

To give just some examples, which is probably the best way of indicating the range, we get quite a few papers from people who've carried out or evaluated some programme of sex education. Often that's in schools, but for example, we had one in a recent issue, which was actually with married women in Iran. We have them in youth settings. Then we have conceptual papers, so we have people arguing from first principals either what should, or

what should not be included within a sex education programme. Then we get things that I hadn't ever expected when the journal was set up that work really well. So we get for example, people looking at a work of art and analysing it within a framework that looks about what is that either conveying or saying about human sex and sexualities. I can give lots more examples. There's a sudden explosion of geographers the last five or ten years who now seem to publish on absolutely everything and anything, and they write some really good stuff about sex education, whereas one might expect one of the particular faux-side interests they have is to do with space and place. So to give a very concrete example there's been some rather good, solid work done about the distribution of teenage pregnancy rates around the United Kingdom, so you find for example far higher rates in sea-side towns. And then geographers start to link that with issues to do with mobility which tends to lead to looser social structures, and roughly speaking it's usually tight communities and strong social structures that are more likely to reduce teenage pregnancy rates. That's just one example, there are loads of other things that affect teenage pregnancy rates, but as an example of geographers writing. Not surprisingly we have historians writing, philosophers, quite a range of people.

**5. What do you think are the most contentious issues, you mentioned teen – pregnancy I guess as one of them, but what are the more controversial or contentious issues in contemporary debate that your journal seeks to address?**

Well even in the comparatively short time, which is about ten years, the journal's been going, I think some of the issues have shifted. So when the journal was first starting, issues to do with the acceptability of gay relationships and the way they might be discussed in schools were still fairly controversial among the academic community who were writing. Now it is still controversial how you might practically, in a school, address issues to do with sexualities, but there's a pretty strong consensus among people who work in the field that the validity of a sexual relationship is independent of whether it's heterosexual or gay, or lesbian.

Other things that are still controversial to this day tend to include things about the extent to which individual autonomy is the overriding good. This is a perennial question; philosophy of education, in other words if I make decision for myself, freely chosen, is that basically enough to make that decision good for me? So communitarians, people in the different pole, would say, 'for crying out loud, you've got to be joking, you've got to look about consequences for other people, harms, there's some sort of overall net benefit for society'.

Now that's only a couple of examples of what's controversial. I think what I'd probably say is, the journal, of course, doesn't seek to make decisions about whether something gets published or not on the basis of whether it's controversial. So we're not trying to publish the *Daily Mail*, or something like that. Because the topic sex education is both often quite controversial and quite sensitive, those are relevant aspects of a lot of the papers that crop up. But then you get academic controversy in what to other people might seem the most dry of topics, so I also work in the field of science education, and we think it's profoundly controversial about the extent to which children's misconceptions in science should be eradicated or are acceptable, and other people don't think that's very controversial.

**6. Are there any particular areas of debate at the moment that are taking place in the journal, that you think are interesting or that you would like to draw the reader's attention to?**

Well one thing I'd like to see more on, which we haven't got a huge amount on, I think, is the extent to which the Western model of school and college sex education can be rolled out internationally. There's a slight tendency, which there is in many parts of the curriculum, to use the quotes 'best curricula' from the USA, Canada, Australia, and apply them in different countries after quite a low level amount of filtering so literally translating, leaving off one or two of the most controversial bits. I think what I'd rather see is a slightly deeper amount of thought about what in any particular culture, in any particular setting does one really want to get from sex education, and there is probably more writing that can be done like that. It's probably, thinking aloud, an area where you can get quite an interesting amount of work done between practitioners and academics, because good practitioners in sex education nearly always start from the concerns of the individuals they're working with, whether they're young people, adults, and wherever the setting is; in an institution, or outside it.

**7. Do you get a sense of who your readership is or where your audience is and do you direct the content of the journal towards that audience? Who do you feel is your core audience?**

The content of the journal is not directed in any fine-grained way whatsoever towards the readership. The content of the journal is defined by the aims of the journal and by the quality of the submissions. So in that sense, it is a fairly classic model of, we know what ought to be published in the journal and it's up to them out there to decide if they want to read it and buy it. At the same time, you always find there's a bit more of a two way interchange than that might seem to indicate, because of course many of the people who read the journal are precisely the people who are likely to end up making submissions, and so you do find shifts over time. We tend every couple of years, to have a conference which has been organised either by me, or by other people very closely associated with the journal, that's an obvious and rather good way to get face to face meetings with people who either read the journal, who submit to it, who are considering submitting to it, and then at other conferences, mainly academic but occasionally professional, the publishers distribute leaflets about the journal, the publishers run stands where people can come and talk to them and then some of that gets fed back to me as well.

The core audience I think really consists of two groups. One group is simply academics in the field, so that's the field of sex education, sexualities, education. The second group is what might be described as practitioners who want to try and keep on top of some of current developments. And those practitioners could be everybody from teachers in school, from people working at GP level, a number of nurses that not only read the journal but have submitted to the journal, occasionally even we've had relationship counsellors, we've had somebody literally who works as a professional agony aunt for a newspaper, where the journal ended up accepting a paper from them which they were quite open about the fact that it might need quite a bit of support from the editor in getting it into a fairly academic format, in fact it needed less support than I thought it might do because it was rather well written already. We're very keen to have a range of ways in which people write for the journal, and to attract a range of people who write for the journal.

**8. What do you look for when considering articles and submissions?**

There's no doubt that as an Editor, when you first get a submission, what you're doing is two things: at one level you're simply filtering so, a fairly small proportion, we're probably only talking about twenty, twenty-five percent, do not get sent out by me for review, that's

because they fall into one of a number of categories. Sometimes they simply fall outside the scope of the journal, the classic example of this is very well written papers but that are simply medical papers concentrating on sexually transmitted infections or issues to do with epidemiology. Another possibility is, that we will occasionally get papers, and this is very common for many journal editors, that as yet are not ready for submission to the journal but will be. And half the time you think this is just a couple of chapters from somebody's PHD or from a very long research report and then you write them an encouraging short note, gently explaining why as yet it wouldn't be worthwhile sending out to review, but you hope they'll submit it. You might offer to send them an example of a paper if they haven't already downloaded it, point them to the website so they can look at a couple of papers and so on. Occasionally you just get stuff where I'm afraid it's very obvious it's not ever going to be an academic paper. Nor does it come in the category very occasionally published letters, but only very occasionally, it's just something that ought to go, for example, to an entirely professional journal. By which I mean the paper either makes no claim to make an advance in knowledge, or if it claims to make an advance in knowledge and to contribute value to the field, it fails in that claim, and that's obvious on a twenty minute skim read which is all I give it. That's the first important chunk. What you're then looking for, at the end of the stage, when you're making the final decision is basically, 'is there something in here which a reader, however well he or she knows the literature is going to learn from and think is of value?' That's the fundamental criterion. Are they going to get something from it, in which they might disagree, but in some way is contributing to building up the literature?

### **9. Is there any advice you would give researchers or people who would like to be published?**

There is a huge amount of advice, and I benefitted when I started my writing career in being given advice, otherwise you just learn by almost everything getting rejected, which is a bit soul-destroying after a while. The most obvious advice, that journal editors are always absolutely amazed at the fact that only about half of all submissions manage to take account of it, is to follow precisely the journal guidelines. Human nature being what it is, one is just more predisposed to view favourably something which comes in which is about the right length, which is reasonably in the format of the journal, and which connects pretty closely with the journal's aims, where there is an abstract, where there is a title, etcetera, etcetera. Again, human nature being what it is when you do get things, and one does, which lack a title, which lack an abstract, which have margins which are about a tenth of an inch your heart sinks. Now in fact, one tries to put that to one side and still look at the core of it. But there's that sort of presentational thing.

The other thing is, and this is a much more important point, you want people who, in an article, really have got something they're trying to say which is either underpinned by empirical evidence or where there is some conceptual thread throughout the paper that makes an argument. The bizarre thing is, almost all of us are capable of doing this in conversation, but many people, once they get to paper, do not end up sending something in which is as high quality as if they were talking to somebody. And I think it's partly because so much writing gets done at weekends and late in the evening, people do it over a matter of weeks, so by the time with desperation and thankfulness they finish the article, they've completely forgotten what they said at the beginning whereas of course I, reading through in twenty minutes just know that at the beginning it says it's going to be about X and by the time I get to the end, it's related to X but if you were talking to somebody, you'd think this person is rather bizarre because they can't hold a conversation in their head. You know we started talking about

politics of the Iraq war, and without it being very obvious why, we've ended up with some commentary about changes in carpet making in the Middle East, or something. And you do get that with articles.

**10. Given the UK's lead status among European nations for teen pregnancy, how can *Sex Education* address this reality? What are the changes or improvements you would like to see made to sex education in schools in the UK?**

Well I admit we are now talking about a UK question and this is an international journal, but the rather sad thing is that we know perfectly well sex educators in the UK have drastically to reduce teenage pregnancy levels and it could be done fairly straightforwardly. Ever so briefly, teenage pregnancy levels are the highest in Europe in the UK roughly speaking for two main reasons, one of which, which is much more difficult to switch though encouragingly it is now high on the agenda of all the main political parties, is we have a greater social inequality in the UK than in just about any other European country. It's not as high as it is in America. In the USA they have greater inequalities and incidentally greater teenage pregnancy rates. That's pretty difficult to shift and one can get into a long discussion about why teenage pregnancy rates are much higher in places where people are in much lower socio-economic situations but they are, and that's true both in individual family level and at a borough level, when you do those sorts of analysis.

But the second way, which is much easier to shift, is that you lower teenage pregnancy levels when you increase the quality a) of school provisions in sex education and b) make it much easier for young people to be able to access contraception in family planning services. And there is so much known about how to do that from, for example, from the Netherlands and Scandinavian countries, and there are plenty of good examples in the UK so we know that could be rolled out more widely. What you can't do so quickly in the UK is to make sex much more open as a topic of conversation between parents and carers and their young teenage children, which it is more open in the Netherlands and Scandinavia. So I wouldn't be able to claim we could get sex education rates rapidly down to the levels they are in the Netherlands which is literally only about a sixth of what they are here, but you could halve them quite quickly.

**11. What other changes or improvements would you like to see made to sex education in schools in the UK?**

If one made PSHE compulsory, which is more or less-ish happening, that would help, and then you need high quality continuing professional development for teachers so that a higher proportion of those teaching it feel really relaxed and comfortable about teaching it. And then you need to ideally make it much easier for young people to go and visit the family planning clinics, get some idea of what it might be like.

**12. How central are discussions and teachings about values, respect and morality to sex education, and should sexual orientation, love, relationships and marriage, be part of any sex education curriculum?**

There's been a bit of a consensus the last fifteen years or so that issues to do with values and morality are indeed central to sex education. There was quite a suspicion about this because

of course words like morality are used in various ways, so people on what loosely let's call the left, will be suspicious by words like morality because they thought they might just be very, as they saw it, right wing, conservative importations of values. The reality is when you speak with parents and young people, there's quite a high degree of concordance with what they would like in terms of values out of sex education. This is not very surprising because most people in terms of values want a mixture of things to do with respect, concern, they want value of autonomy, but they also want thinking of other people as individuals. And what is occasionally with a very small number of people, a rather extraordinary belief that if one only talks about sex education in a school context, you're likely to increase the likelihood of young people having sexual intercourse, can nearly always be diffused both by a bit of talking about it and then also by just a tiny bit of evidence. Some people do not realise quite the extent to which sex is of course a part of the media, I don't just mean newspapers, but all the range of media for young people in a way that it wasn't forty years ago .

When you get on to particular issues of what should and should not be included in a programme, I'm often thought actually to be a little bit middle of the road-ish here, because I'd much rather see quality sex education going on pretty widely even if you didn't include certain topics. So I'm perfectly comfortable with the school deciding 'we're not going to include homosexuality' if they want to. Actually, when they get on to something like their bullying policy, they'll probably find they need to start looking a bit at sexual orientation because it's one of the main reasons for bullying in schools. But my experience, for example, with talking with Muslim families, with families from Roman Catholic communities, is the important thing is usually to get high quality school sex education going on by which there's a great deal of agreement and then to worry after you've done it a couple of years or so, about well, do you need to broaden it a bit or do we keep it as it is?

### **13. Do you think the provision of family planning services within schools is appropriate or not?**

Well this is now getting on to Michael Reiss as you as an individual so obviously this has got nothing to do with the line that the journal takes. I tend to both be actually rather conservative myself in this particular alliance and my short answer would be no, not normally. And then you start talking about, well, you could have sixth-form centres within an 11-18 school or certainly within a sixth-form college, where if the student body wanted it and the staff as a whole were happy then fairly obviously that's a slightly different matter, but partly this is because I'm aware, politically, it's just very counterproductive in some schools if you get just some story of a fourteen year old who starts obtaining contraception because, it can get blown out of all proportion and can end up being rather unhelpful to the rest of the young people in the school. But also, values change over time and this is an important point both in common sense and academically, and I tend to be somebody who has a very strong belief in consensus so I wouldn't want to give some blanket answer for the whole of the UK. If you're talking about Northern Ireland it's ever so different from if you're talking about parts elsewhere in the UK, and Briton.

### **14. What's the consensus regarding the provision of family planning services in schools at the minute?**

Well I'm glad to say there's remarkably little consensus in sex education in my experience, which is one of the reasons why you need a good academic journal, because you want to start interrogating the reasons for the different viewpoints that people hold and that is part of the

function of academics, because most people haven't got the time and space to start repetitively asking why, why, why, why, why, why, and some of the papers we've had have been incredibly good in the journal, and make a difference in many, many, many countries. The most recent one I read for example, which I finished doing the penultimate edit yesterday morning on the train, is about the views of parents in Tanzania who are far more positive about wanting school sex education than almost everybody who doesn't live in Tanzania tends to assume. This is a very common phenomenon worldwide. So the nice thing is that actually publishing academic papers often ends up doing a huge amount of good, because senior policy makers in countries often do end up getting these fed into them via the advisors they have.