BOYS AND GIRLS SPEAK OUT

A Qualitative Study of Children’s Gender and Sexual Cultures (age 10-12)

An exploratory research project to inform the National Assembly for Wales Cross-Party Group on Children, Sexualities, ‘Sexualisation’ and Equalities.
BACKGROUND AND SCOPE

In January 2012 Jocelyn Davies (AM) set up the National Assembly for Wales cross-party group, Children, Sexualities, ‘Sexualisation’ and Equalities. The launch of the cross-party group stressed how equalities, social justice issues and children’s own experiences have been largely absent from media debates and government research reviews on what is often referred to as ‘the sexualisation of children’.

Following the launch, the Welsh Government and Cardiff University sponsored a one-day conference, “Children, Sexuality and Sexualisation: A Matter of Equalities, Rights and Voice” (30 March 2012). This event brought together secondary school age children, academics, assembly members, policy makers and professionals into dialogue with one another through presentations and workshops. Responding to children’s own feedback from the conference to become more directly involved in research that informs and shapes policy; to “be listened to” and to “speak freely” about sexuality issues, a sub-committee of the cross-party group raised a modest budget to conduct an original and exploratory qualitative research project into pre-teen children’s sexual cultures in which children’s own views and experiences took centre stage.

Research overview

The research used participatory methods to generate qualitative data on how diverse groups of pre-teen children (age 10-12, n=125) understand their own and other’s gender and sexual identities, relationships and cultures. Its core aims were three-fold: to address the lack of knowledge about children’s own sexual cultures in the context of their everyday lives; to foreground equality and diversity (Public Sector Equality Duty, 2012); and to enable children’s own views and experiences to inform and shape future research, policies and practice (Article 12, UNCRC).

The Research Team

The research was designed, conducted, analysed and written up by Professor Emma Renold (Cardiff University). Sion Tetlow (PhD Student, Cardiff University) assisted with 10 of the boys’ group interviews.

The research was supported by the office of the Children’s Commissioner for Wales and Vivienne Laing (NSPCC) from the Cross-Party Group sub-committee. Comments, guidance and advice was sought from an expert panel, including: Hannah Austin (Welsh Women’s Aid), Dr. Clare Bale, Dr. Sara Bragg (University of Brighton), Professor Ann Phoenix (Institute of Education, London), Jan Pickles (NSPCC), and Professor Jessica Ringrose (Institute of Education, London).

Acknowledgements

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Deep gratitude goes to the boys and girls for their participation and lively engagement in the research activities. Their enthusiasm and eagerness to ‘be heard’ was palpable and their sense of intimate and social justice was visceral and impressive. Thank you also to the teachers and parents who made their participation and this research possible.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Silence, denial and anxiety dominate media debates on young children and sexuality. This is particularly evident in recent concerns over what is commonly referred to as the ‘sexualisation of children’. However, the majority of these debates tell us more about adult concerns and fears, than children’s own views and experiences.

Children’s views have either been absent, sidelined, ignored or simplified in the ‘sexualisation’ debates. Moreover, issues of equalities, rights and social justice rarely surface in ways that attend to the complexity of being and becoming sexual.

This research adopts a broadly sociological approach to sexuality* and prioritizes children’s own views and experiences so that our understandings of children’s sexual cultures are located in (and challenged by) the rich and diverse views of children themselves.

The research sought to address a significant knowledge gap in our understanding of how pre-teen (age 10-12) children are negotiating their own and other’s gender and sexual identities, relationships and cultures. It foregrounds the diversity of children’s views and experiences, and emphasises equality, well-being, ‘voice’ and agency.

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Research questions
1 / What are pre-teen boys’ and girls’ views on the public debates of ‘premature commercial sexualisation’ and living in increasingly ‘sex-saturated’ societies?

2 / In what ways and in what contexts do pre-teen boys and girls experience their bodies as fun, pleasurable, safe, risky and dangerous?

3 / What kinds of peer cultures (e.g. close friendships, boyfriends and girlfriends etc.) shape the everyday social worlds of pre-teen boys and girls?

4 / How are pre-teen boys and girls negotiating gender and sexual cultures in locally and culturally specific ways?

Methods
To address the under-researched area of pre-teen (10-12) sexual cultures, an exploratory interview-based qualitative research design, using creative methods was created. 125 children, from urban and rural South Wales took part in the research.

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1/ * Sexuality is used in this report to capture a wide range of social, material, cultural and bodily practices. It prioritizes the different ways in which children themselves understand how language, image, and physical, emotional and social relations and relationships can be charged with sexual meaning in the context of their everyday lives.
KEY FINDINGS

Sexuality and sexual learning is part of children’s everyday lives
Children are actively negotiating and learning about the contradictory ways in which sexuality shapes who they are, how they feel in their bodies, what they can do, where they can go, how they relate to others and how others relate to them.

Looking older isn’t necessarily about wanting to be ‘sexy’
Adult’s fears of children “growing up too soon” are disconnected from children’s own experiences. Boys and girls talked about “looking older” or “looking sexy” in very different ways.

Putting up with everyday sexism
The pressure to conform to gender norms are pervasive in children’s lives. Girls in particular talked about the difficulty of “being yourself” and “fitting in”.

Boyfriend and girlfriend cultures are prevalent in children’s social worlds, but experienced in diverse ways.
Many children talked about the pressure to participate in boyfriend-girlfriend cultures in school, making boy-girl friendships almost impossible. These pressures were particularly acute for girls.

Young children do experience sexual harassment
Verbal sexual harassment was not uncommon in children’s boyfriend-girlfriend cultures, but few children could talk about it with a parent or teacher and were ill-equipped to know how to deal with harassing comments.

Children are critical of sexually explicit media.
What children found offensive or ‘risky’ differed for boys and girls. Children were more worried about scary images than ‘sexually explicit’ images. What children perceived as harmful often depended upon the specific social contexts and wider risks in their everyday lives.

Many children were angry about having to live in a sexist peer culture and society.
While some children found creative ways of managing and/or challenging gender and sexual stereotypes, mostly they were despairing at the fulility of their own individual attempts at addressing everyday sexisms and verbal sexual harassment.

Policy needs to be informed by children’s own experiences
Only by developing policies and practices which speak to children’s own gender and sexual cultures can practitioners and policy makers fully support girls’ and boys’ own understanding and experiences of why they feel the way they do, what it means for the way they act, and how things can change.

2/ The concept of harassment, rather than bullying, is used to conceptualise the verbal, physical, material, emotional and psychological sexual and gendered abuses of power in children’s everyday peer cultures and social worlds. Harassment is used because it can better capture not only the individual and peer group practices that children described as unwanted, hurtful and disturbing, but also the more routine and normalised everyday sexisms circulating in peer culture and wider society.
Children's own accounts powerfully illustrate how sexuality is often simultaneously and unevenly experienced as a mixture of fun, power, powerlessness, anxiety, danger and risk.

The ways in which their bodies, social interactions, objects and language are charged with sexual meaning is experienced by children in contradictory ways. Meanings, norms, values and experiences shift and change as children move between different contexts (e.g. schools, parks, homes) which is why this research focuses on gender and sexual cultures.

Many children are aware of how sexuality is highly gendered, and exists in a local and global culture that either demands, or presumes a hetero-sexuality.

It is imperative to consider the ways in which age, gender, social class, race, religion, dis/ability and locale shape and regulate how children are learning about sexuality.
Looking older isn’t necessarily about wanting to be ‘sexy’

Adult’s fears of children “growing up too soon” are disconnected from children’s own experiences. Boys and girls talked about “looking older” or “looking sexy” in very different ways.

‘Looking older’ (e.g. wearing high heels or cultivating ‘six packs’) was rarely about ‘being sexy’. For some children, particularly girls, ageing up was a bid for social autonomy and a desire to be given more freedom by adults. For others, looking young was risky and looking older was about protecting themselves from peer violence in their community.

Whilst the term ‘sexy’ carried many different meanings, it almost always referred to a normative heterosexual ‘sexy’. For many boys being (hetero) ‘sexy’ could be something that they could take or leave. Rarely was ‘sexy’ perceived by boys as risky or dangerous.

For girls being ‘sexy’ was an ambivalent experience. It could be used as an insult and a compliment and could create harsh social and cultural hierarchies between girls.

Many girls were aware and highly critical of heterosexual double standards and girls of all ages talked about their bodies as being constantly judged and valued.

Indeed, many girls suffered from verbal sexual harassment from within their own peer culture (boys and girls) and from older boys, and more so in public places than online.
Girls of all ages talked about their bodies almost wholly in relation to their appearance and the considerable effort that went into producing a recognizable and socially acceptable ‘girl’ body. In contrast, boys talked less about their appearance and what a body looked like (e.g. muscularity, fashion) and more about what a body did (e.g. sporting achievement).

Bodily anxiety and bodily dissatisfaction dominated girls’ talk about their bodies and was much less present in boys’ talk. Many girls preferred comfy clothes, like tracksuit bottoms and hoodies, and clothes that covered rather than revealed the contours of their body. Many girls (especially Year 8’s) talked about giving up on the physically active pursuits they enjoyed as younger girls, such as sports, dance, den-building, horse-riding and biking) because of the clash between a sporty body (e.g. muscular or sweaty) and dominant expectations of ‘femininity’.

Girls also talked about struggling with media messages to ‘be yourself’ and social pressures to ‘be like everyone else’ and conform to narrow notions of heterosexual attractiveness. Some boys talked about not being ‘fussed on fashion’, and “not caring as much as girls”. Those who did invest a lot in fashion, talked about wanting to ‘look tidy’ and not ‘scruffy’ or ‘poor’.

Many boys and some girls considered girls’ interest in fashion and cosmetic culture as ‘over the top’, and as a sign of girls’ heterosexual availability (e.g. “to get a boyfriend”). Girls also talked about the practices of social exclusion and sexist and verbal sexual harassment for not investing in high street fashion and cosmetic culture. Some girls talked about parental pressure to conform to gender stereotypes, with parents paying girls who identified as tomboys to wear dresses to school discos and proms.

The pressure to conform to gender norms is pervasive in children’s lives. Girls in particular talked about the difficulty of “being yourself” and “fitting in”. Indeed many older girls had given up on the active pursuits they enjoyed when they were younger because sporty bodies clashed with their ‘femininity’.

Putting up with everyday sexism

“I feel pushed to be a girl”
(May, age 10)

“I think natural is best […] but you cannot go to school without make-up”
(Hayley, age 11)

“If I don’t feel good about myself then the last thing I want to do is draw attention to myself by wearing rude stuff!”
(Steph, age 12)
Many boys and girls had little choice but to participate in or witness a variety of practices such as ‘fancying’, ‘dating’ and ‘dumping’, for example, who ‘liked’, ‘loved’, or was ‘hot’ for who. This was particularly the case in children’s talk about their final year of primary school.

While the degree to which girls and boys participated in these practices varied considerably across the sample, most children could name and discuss them at length. In some schools, children described their participation as compulsory and as a cycle of endless ‘going out and dumping’ that was subject to constant peer scrutiny and evaluation. The pressure to turn a boy-girl friendship into a boyfriend-girlfriend ‘relationship’ in primary school was pervasive.

For some boys, simply ‘having a girlfriend’, ‘any girl’ was enough to secure social status and popularity. In contrast, many girls highlighted the ways in which their status as ‘girlfriends’ objectified them, particularly when girls’ attractiveness was rated and ranked. Many girls also resented how they were ‘passed around’ and ‘fought over’ by boys who wanted to claim them as ‘theirs’.

Being a girlfriend for girls was talked about as an inevitable part of being a normal girl and variously described as an identity that was older, scary, constraining, powerful, and something that had to be endured and got used to. Resisting or rejecting the world of girlfriends and boyfriend-girlfriend cultures was difficult for girls, particularly in schools and communities where early boyfriend-girlfriend cultures were strong.

Being a boyfriend for boys was not a defining feature of pre-teen boyhood. Many boys did not want a girlfriend. For younger boys, being a boyfriend was a precarious role that aligned them with femininity (which could be shaming) and heterosexuality (which could bolster their ‘masculinity’). Boys were more able to resist participation in boyfriend-girlfriend cultures than girls.

Deep investment in being a boyfriend or girlfriend was highly classed, raced and gendered, and drawn upon in a range of ways. One boy talked about how his primary school girlfriend helped him cope with the death of his father. Another boy explained how he had to pretend that his best friend Alice was his cousin for an entire school year, so that they could hang out free from heterosexual innuendo. Girls who they witnessed domestic violence talked about finding a boyfriend who could protect them.
Only a minority of girls talked about feeling resigned to the fact that relationships might entail some form of harassment because ‘some boys are just nasty’. Some girls and boys resorted to physical and verbal harassment as a response to coercive, controlling or abusive behaviours and a compulsory boyfriend-girlfriend culture.

Children were ill-equipped with knowing how to deal with gender and sexual harassment and very few children felt comfortable talking about these issues with parents or teachers.

Boyfriend-girlfriend cultures were frequently talked about as compulsory, scrutinized, collective and highly public practices. Many children talked about these practices as contradictory, hierarchical and rarely consensual.

Some girls talked about going out with boys they didn’t want to and some avoided dumping them so as not to hurt their feelings. Many children also witnessed coercive sexual practices, such as being “forced to kiss” in the playground, which urge us to shift our understandings of consent between two individuals, to consent as a social process negotiated in peer group cultures.

Girls with deep investments in ‘being a girlfriend’, talked about going out with boys they didn’t like or who were verbally abusive to them, with some girls interpreting their abusive behavior as a sign of flirtation. Some girls refused to delete “nasty” texts because they were “in love”.

Boys with deep investments in ‘being a boyfriend’ and boys positioned low down the gendered and sexual peer group hierarchies were also described as the same boys who would engage in harassing behavior such as repeatedly asking girls out, or sending abusive texts to girls who refused to go out with them, or ended the relationship.

Children who talked about receiving sexually abusive texts and emails also talked about how they could be deleted or blocked, and almost all of the children described in detail exactly how to achieve this. However, they were much less confident and felt more vulnerable about how to deal with on-going ‘romantic’ advances (e.g. repeatedly being ‘asked out’) or sexually harassing comments from boys in school and in their community, with one girl hiding in her house, refusing to open the door.

Young children do experience sexual harassment

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Many children offered powerful critical commentaries from nudity on MTV to air-brushed images of models in magazines. Many girls also drew a clear boundary between what their favourite celebrities would say or do and their own lives. Many children talked about blocking, deleting or changing channels that were broadcasting sexually explicit content that they found offensive. However, what children found offensive was culturally specific and highly gendered. Some 10 year olds thought “kissing on Eastenders” was “disgusting”, others thought that “Playboy TV” was “disgusting”. Many girls talked about receiving unsolicited sexually explicit ‘pop-ups’ (e.g. adverts for sex dating websites) from free downloading music sites as “something we shouldn’t have to face”. Some girls talked about how offensive these pop-ups were in similar ways to the kinds of inter-personal verbal sexual harassment they were subject to in school and on the street. Boys did not talk about these pop-ups as offensive or upsetting.

The perceived harm of being confronted with sexually explicit images (e.g. partial nudity, erotic dancing) depended greatly upon social context and other risk factors, such as whether such practices were part of other forms of sexual/gender-based violence.

Children reported receiving more ‘scary’ than ‘sexually explicit’ unsolicited images and texts. No child disclosed sending a sexually explicit image of themselves.
Many children were highly articulate about having to put up with a range of sexist and heterosexist practices inside their own peer cultures, communities and in wider society.

The majority of children expressed how they wished they could talk freely about gender and sexuality issues and in ways that were more connected to their own lives and experiences (and not just their futures).

Some children were very vocal in wanting to actively change what they talked about as constraining and punishing gender and sexual norms. However, many struggled with knowing how their views could change practice.

Children most vocal were often those living in families and communities where gender and sexual violence (e.g. domestic violence) was present. However, for these children in particular, challenging gender discriminations was difficult and could lead to social exclusion.

Some children used on-line games as safe spaces to access and experiment with different identities and behaviours, particularly those which subverted cultural norms of age, religion and heterosexuality or a socially acceptable ‘femininity’ (e.g aggression).

Many children were angry about having to live in a sexist peer culture and society.

While some children found creative ways of managing and/or challenging gender and sexual stereotypes, mostly they were despairing at the futility of their own individual attempts at addressing everyday sexisms and verbal sexual harassment.
IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The key aim of this project was to address the lack of research regarding pre-teen children’s gender and sexual cultures in the context of their everyday lives. Central to this aim was to foreground equality and diversity issues (Public Sector Equality Duty, 2012) and enable children’s own views and experiences to inform and shape future research, policy and practice (Article 12, UNCRC).

As an exploratory study, findings ranged widely across diverse and overlapping areas, many of which connect to numerous and progressive Welsh policy and guidance on bullying, sexual health, equalities, well-being and Sex and Relationships Education.

As research consistently points out, however, policies, guidance and duties do not necessarily translate into practice. While there is much good practice about, it can vary considerably across local authorities and individual schools and third sector organisations.

Pertinent to the findings of this research is how existing guidance which has the potential to directly address children’s experiences, for example, of ‘coercive sexual behaviour’ (WAG 2011:7) may be considered ‘inappropriate’ to discuss and/or raise with primary school aged children, and younger pre-teens. For teachers who do recognise and want to address some of the everyday sexisms or gendered and sexual harassment within and across boys’ and girls’ peer group cultures, many lack the training and confidence that such training can often foster, or they may be unsupported by senior management.

Indeed, given that providing sex and relationships education in Welsh primary schools is not mandatory but left to the discretion of each individual school (section 101 (1) of the Education Act 2002), some teachers may find both time and resources for training in the area of sex and relationships hard to negotiate. Rarely does SRE extend beyond the PSHE curriculum as in whole-school approaches, where gender and sexuality can be taught across a range of curriculum subjects, from science to English literature or history, and rarely is it framed in terms of equalities or rights.

Findings from this research suggest that ‘starting from where children are at’ is essential in meeting and supporting children’s needs and experiences and the everyday realities of children’s gendered and sexual cultures (online and offline).

This will involve challenging many of the assumptions adults bring to children’s social worlds: for example that boyfriend-girlfriend cultures might be drawn upon by children to ‘just be friends’ rather than evidence of ‘premature sexualisation’ or mimicking ‘older’ relationships.

While many of the key findings will be addressed by the cross-party group over the coming year in terms of how they might inform and shape future policy, practice and pedagogy, some key recommendations can be drawn:

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Sex and Relationships Education: Welsh Government should respond to the evidence presented here and by the Task and Finish Group¹ that reported to them in 2012 on the need to improve education and awareness raising in relation to sex and relationship education (SRE). The evidence provided in this research strongly suggests that children in primary school need access to an age appropriate SRE curriculum and that the contents of such a curriculum should be informed by and be able to respond to the reality of their day to day experiences.

A rights-based approach to Sex and Relationships Education: the development of appropriate SRE material for children should aim to promote an understanding of every child’s right to be safe (Article 19, UNCRC) and promote cultural change that challenges gender stereotypes and prejudice and practices in line with a human rights approach² and the Public Sector Equalities Duty.

Supporting children’s well-being: There is a need for strong national leadership on supporting children’s well-being within and beyond schools. Actions to address the issues highlighted through this research should form part of a robust framework of work in schools to promote equality and diversity and to support the social and emotional needs of children. This should include a consideration of the benefits of offering school counseling services in primary schools. Reforms being considered in relation to improving classroom teaching and learning, strengthening school leadership, organising school improvement and promoting best practice must include a clear focus on measures to support pupil well-being, children’s rights, equality and diversity issues and sexual health and well-being.


²/ General obligation contained in Article 12 of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women in terms of (1. Parties shall take the necessary measures to promote changes in the social and cultural patterns of behaviour of women and men with a view to eradicating prejudices, customs, traditions and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority of women or on stereotyped roles for women and men).
Assessing children’s well-being: A consistent and robust approach to measuring well-being should be developed that includes measures for self-reporting in line with Welsh Government commitments to pupil voice and article 12 of the UNCRC. Inspection processes should ensure that education providers are held to account in relation to measures of children’s well-being.

Supporting parents and carers: parenting and family information and support services should provide parent/carers with clear and informed guidance on how to talk to their children about sex, relationship and gender issues.

Information and advice for children and young people: children and young people should be provided with clear information about equality and diversity issues, relationships and where they can go for advice and support about worries and concerns on these issues, including sexual harassment. The Welsh Government should work with children and young people to design a media campaign and virtual resources in order to raise awareness of equality and diversity issues, including gender and sexuality inside and outside school, and of where they can find advice and support.

**FUTURE RESEARCH**

This research has been exploratory and has opened up many more issues that warrant further investigation. Some potential research topics could include:

- a comprehensive all Wales survey to examine the prevalence of key aspects of the findings regarding young relationship cultures, and the complexities and impact of gender and sexual harassment inside and outside of school.
- how the power relations in young relationship cultures (age 9-12), intersect with relationship cultures of older siblings, families and the wider community (online and offline).
- the gender and sexual cultures of children in the early years
- the ways in which gender and sexuality mediate the peer cultures of children with physical disabilities and additional learning needs.
- physical feminism: investigating the relationship between gender identity, physical activity and locale.
- learning from children about safe spaces to experiment with and challenge, sexual/gender norms and inequalities (online and offline)
- longitudinal research to follow diverse groups of children from this cohort as they transition into Key Stage 4 (particularly exploring the intersection of gender, race and religion).