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# **Educator-student communication in Sex & Relationship Education: A comparison of teacher and peer-led interventions**

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## **Educator-student communication in Sex & Relationship Education: A comparison of teacher and peer-led interventions**

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper presents findings from a comparative study of peer- and teacher-led Sex and Relationship Education (SRE). One lesson delivered by a peer educator, and one lesson delivered by a teacher was observed with the aim of exploring the communicative process between educators and students within SRE. It is claimed that open communication between students and peer educators promotes the adoption of positive attitudes to sexual health, making it a potential alternative to teacher-led provision. Yet to our knowledge, no studies have investigated the communicative process within peer-led adolescent health interventions to examine factors underpinning its potential efficacy. The development of a coding scheme to measure the extent to which educators and students are communicating openly within SRE is used to describe the communicative process between sex educators and students, characterise differences in communication within peer and teacher-led conditions and discuss how these differences affect student participation in SRE. Results suggest interaction of students in the peer-led condition was different to that of students receiving teacher-led SRE; and provide valuable insight into educator-student communication in the context of classroom-based SRE.

**Keywords:** sex education, peer education, adolescence, student engagement, classroom talk

## **Background**

Educating young people about sexual health remains of crucial importance as those under 25 years continue to experience the highest STI rates in the United Kingdom. In 2015, 62% of chlamydia, 52% of gonorrhoea, 51% of genital warts, and 41% of genital herpes diagnoses in England were amongst those aged 15 to 24 years (Public Health England, 2016). This trend has been attributed to a number of factors amongst which is the perceived failings of school-based SRE. It is not clear what factors hinder or promote successful SRE, or what measures should be taken to improve its delivery in schools. It is suggested that for school-based SRE to be effective the subject needs to be delivered in an open and informal manner; rather than the traditional didactic methods used to teach other areas of the curriculum. This can be problematic for teachers as their professionalism necessitates hierarchical teacher-student relationships and formal teaching methods which are difficult to disregard on a topic by topic basis (Allen, 2005; Kehily, 2002). Open, relaxed or informal communication is frequently mentioned as an essential component of effective SRE (Allen, 2005), with young people themselves specifically requesting more discussion of a more open nature (Langille, MacKinnon, Marshall, & Graham, 2001; Lupton & Tulloch, 1996; Measor, Tiffin, & Miller, 2000). Thus the claim that 'open and sub-culturally relevant communication' (Stephenson et al., 2008, 1580) is more likely to occur between peer educators and students make peer education an attractive alternative to teacher-led provision. It is believed that open communication is especially present in interactions with peers and increases the likelihood of attitudinal/behavioural change than when SRE is delivered by adult professionals (Kidger, 2004). There are a number of perceived benefits to using peer educators in SRE including cost effectiveness, acceptability to young people, and the ability of peers to influence social norms. Proponents of peer-led SRE also point to evidence of teachers' discomfort discussing topics of a sexual nature with students as

further justification for the adoption of the approach (Forrest, Strange, & Oakley, 2002; Gordon & Gere, 2016). Several studies have noted the use of ‘defensive teaching’ by teachers within SRE to keep to ‘safe’ topics and avoid controversy (Buston, Wight, & Scott, 2001; Kidger, 2002; Trudell, 1992, 1993). Restricting communication in this way is ‘unlikely to result in a comfortable experience for either teachers or pupils, nor is it likely to achieve positive behavioural change’ (Buston, Wight, & Scott, 2001, 367). The nature of teacher-student relationships create discomfort on the part of both teachers and students within SRE (Allen, 2005; Langille et al., 2001; Lester & Allan, 2006; Pound, Langford, & Campbell, 2016). These problems are attributed to the conflicting social worlds of adult teachers and adolescent students being forced into open confrontation in the SRE classroom (Allen, 2001; Langille et al., 2001). Schools on the one hand try to deny/regulate student sexuality, whilst young people on the other, use sexuality to challenge and embarrass teachers (Allen, 2007; Thorogood, 2000). In contrast, ‘peerness’ denotes ‘sameness’, and with this a belief that peer educators inhabit the same social world as the students they teach. This not only lessens the degree to which SRE is a battle between the ideals of educator and student, but also suggests that peer educators possess a better understanding of the problems facing their peer group, and how these problems should be addressed in order to educate effectively against these issues. Drawing largely from a mixture of social learning theories, it is posited that similarities between peer educators and students enable peer educators to convey information in a way that is more open, credible and appealing than that provided by teachers (Wight, 2011).

Portraying the educative process of peers in this way is a ‘simplistic model of social relations’ (Price & Knibbs, 2009, 291). Peer education is not as straightforward as it appears. Considerable ambiguity surrounds peer education with little understanding

of factors which may contribute to its success or failure, limiting the effective utilisation of the approach (Frankham, 1998; Milburn, 1995; Turner & Shepherd, 1999; Cornish & Campbell, 2009). This is exacerbated by the lack of uniformity in defining peer education and what constitutes 'peerness' to different social groups. Peer-led interventions differ widely by educator age, training, and selection process, all factors that may influence effectiveness. With regards to peers being alternatives to teachers, it is hypothesised that charging peer educators with the delivery of educational information in a classroom-based context merely results in the creation of 'pseudo-teachers' (Regis, 1996). Young people will search for a model in a similar role of knowledge delivery to replicate, which in all likelihood will be that of a teacher. This phenomenon was recorded by Frankham (1998) who observed peer educators employing the same techniques as teachers during HIV education interventions. The adoption of an authoritarian role may create an unequal relationship between peer educators and students, limiting opportunities for open and equal communication, and therefore negating any argument for the greater communicative advantage of peers over teachers in delivering SRE. In addition, those implementing initiatives need to ensure that peer educators, as members of the target population, are not distributing misinformation, perpetuating or colluding with the same problematic attitudes held by the peer group that interventions are seeking to change.

Nevertheless peer-led approaches continue to enjoy considerable popularity (Price & Knibbs, 2009), despite over ten years of reviews concluding there is limited and highly variable evidence of effectiveness when compared to teacher-led provision (Harden, Oakley, & Weston, 1999; Kim & Free, 2008; Maticka-Tyndale & Barnett, 2010; Medley, Kennedy, O'Reilly, & Sweat, 2009; Tolli, 2012). The largest studies conducted in the United Kingdom to date, The RIPPLE Study and APAUSE Project,

found a minimal effect of peer-led SRE on reported behaviour (Stephenson et al., 2008; Wade, Benton, Gnaldi, & Schagen, 2004). In the RIPPLE study outcome effects were limited to reducing girls' reported sex by age sixteen years (Stephenson et al., 2004). There was no effect on other behavioural outcomes, including contraceptive use, and no longitudinal effects on conception or termination by age 20 years (Stephenson et al., 2008).

Understanding the process of peer education may improve interventions' effectiveness. The apparent simplicity of the approach is appealing, but hinders investigation into the processes of its potential effectiveness. Consequently interventions are implemented without scrutinising their theoretical foundation. There is a need to evaluate the fundamental assumptions underlying peer education (Tolli, 2012). Open communication is not only one of the fundamental assumptions within peer-led SRE, but one that is central to social learning theories, and underpins the utilisation of peer education across wider contexts. Despite this, claims for the presence and effectiveness of open communication within peer-led SRE are yet to be investigated. Existing studies in the UK (Stephenson et al., 2004; Stephenson et al., 2008; Strange, Forrest, Oakley, & The Ripple Study Team, 2002; Wade et al., 2004) whilst citing communication differences as one of the justifications for employing peer-led methods, focus on the feasibility or acceptability of peer-led SRE and whether it can successfully change young people's knowledge/attitudes/behaviour, and neglect to investigate the communicative process that is believed to provide the impetus for this change. The notion that open communication is inhibited between students and teachers, and that it can encourage student participation in SRE, is a largely unproven assumption. Yet it is a common assertion within the literature that peer educators speak to students 'in the vernacular, directly, with the credibility of participants in the same culture and without

any overtones of social control or authoritarianism' (Topping, 1996, 24). Little research has addressed communication within SRE (Forrest, Strange, Oakley, & The RIPPLE Study Team, 2004) and there is an absence of studies specifically detailing the interaction between educators and students (Measor, Tiffin, & Miller, 2000; Price & Knibbs, 2009). What little exists is mainly based on the first-hand accounts of practitioners. Fifteen years after this gap was first identified (Measor et al., 2000), a literature search does not reveal any studies that explore this aspect of peer-led SRE.

In light of this, the present study aims to explore the notion of open communication within peer-led SRE by examining educator-student discussion in peer and teacher delivered SRE. In contrast to previous studies of peer-led SRE it looks beyond lesson content to its delivery. It compares differences in communication between these two approaches, specifically whether interactions between peer educators and students are different to those with teachers and if this has consequences for student participation in SRE.



## **Method**

### ***Setting and Participants***

Two secondary schools in the North of England provided an opportunity for observational study. One school received peer-led SRE, the other teacher-led SRE. A total of 11 students participated in the peer-led arm of the study; 5 participants were male, 6 were female. SRE was delivered by a female peer educator studying at a local university who was not known to students. There were 18 participants in the teacher-led control group: 10 male and 8 female. The session was delivered by the school's Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) co-ordinator who was known to the participants.

### ***Design***

Rather than employing an experimental design and assessing the effectiveness of peer-led SRE as an intervention to effect attitudinal/behavioural change, this was an observational study which aimed to interrogate the notion of peer-led SRE at a deeper level by examining a potential process of effectiveness as has been claimed in the literature. Due to the small-scale, exploratory nature of the study, a convenience sample that utilised pre-existing groups was employed. Participants could not be randomly assigned to groups but efforts were made to ensure that conditions were as similar as possible. Both schools delivered a two-hour long session of SRE to a mixed-sex Year Nine class (13-14 years) covering: relationships, decision-making, contraception, STI's, and sexual health services. One observation of each session was conducted. Sessions were classroom-based with a single educator stood in front of the group.

### ***Measures***

#### ***Open Communication***

To investigate whether communication between peer educators and students is more open than that of teachers and students within SRE, non-participant observations of a

teacher and a peer-led SRE lesson were conducted. Both groups were observed in natural settings as part of normal timetabled lessons in the classroom, giving observations strong ecological validity. A literature search of major databases in Education (ERIC), Psychology (PsychInfo) and Health (MEDLINE, Cinahl) was conducted around the general terms 'peer\*', 'adolescent' and 'sex education' to identify empirical studies, theoretical writings and practical guidelines on peer-led SRE. Instances where authors identified a particular behaviour as encouraging or discouraging open communication with students were used to define and create a coding scheme for open communication within the context of SRE. Positive codes included: students asking direct questions related to subject material (Svenson & Bertinato, 1998); students responding to questions related to subject material (Svenson & Bertinato, 1998); educator asking questions to give students an opportunity to respond to subject material (Forrest et al., 2002); educator answering students' questions related to subject material (Measor et al., 2000); the use of humour (Allen, 2014; Strange, Oakley, Forrest, & The RIPPLE Study Team, 2003; Strange et al., 2002); use of colloquial language or slang (Svenson & Bertinato, 1998); and praise (Morgan, Robbins, & Tripp, 2004). Negative codes include: overuse of biomedical vocabulary (Alldred & David, 2007; Forrest et al., 2002; Langille et al., 2001; Selwyn & Powell, 2007; Svenson & Bertinato, 1998); students not answering questions (Forrest et al., 2002); educator not answering students' questions about subject material (Measor et al., 2000), students 'speaking out' in a way that disrupted the lesson, and prescriptive statements or moralising (Forrest et al., 2002; Halstead & Reiss, 2003; Measor et al., 2000).

### *Procedure*

Each session began by introducing the observer to the class and explaining the purposes of the research. Students were made aware that if at any point they no longer wanted to participate in the study they could speak to a member of staff and request to leave the session. After the introduction the educator delivered the lesson with the researcher observing from the rear of the classroom. Sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and then coded for analysis.

### *Data Analyses*

To identify and characterise open communication in both the peer and teacher-led sessions, the coding scheme (described in the Measures section) was applied to transcripts. For convenience and precision of measurement, a frequency analysis was conducted to count the relative frequency of instances where a code was applied to a transcript. These frequencies were plotted for the duration of the SRE session and inferences were drawn from emergent trends. In this way a systematic method of analysing transcription data was developed which included analysis by two researchers to support interpretations from collected data (Mays & Pope, 1995). Reliability was based on the consistency of coding between researcher and reviewer transcripts. Inter-rater reliability was high (more than 80% agreement). In cases of disagreement, the author and reviewer discussed and resolved discrepancies.

## **Results**

### *Educator-student discussion*

Codes were applied a total of 544 times across transcripts of peer-led and teacher-led SRE, with the peer-led condition displaying more features of open communication. Codes for open communication were applied 335 times to the peer-led SRE transcript and 113 times to the teacher-led transcript. Codes for behaviour that may inhibit open communication were applied 38 times to the peer-led transcript and 58 times to the teacher-led transcript.

### *Students responding to subject material*

In the transcript of teacher-led SRE there were only 2 recorded instances of students directly questioning the teacher compared to 39 recorded instances in the peer-led condition. Students directly addressed the peer educator to ask questions which were thematically grouped into three categories: asking for further explanation of subject material;

P.Ed: has anybody got any questions about HIV or AIDS?

S2: how would you stop it with treatment (.) like how does the treatment work?

for clarification of information;

S3: what's the difference between emergency contraception and then  
contraception?

or to differentiate between fact and fiction;

S10: is it true that you can get gonorrhoea anywhere (.) like your eye?

The peer-led condition was also the only condition in which students would directly respond to the answers they received from the educator, without educator prompting. For example, when discussing men and women's rights, some of the male students were particularly upset to learn they did not have the right to be involved in the decision to abort a foetus. They voiced their discontent:

S9: surely it's the guy and the girl?

P.Ed: unfortunately it's just the girl

S8: this is so unfair (.) I don't want this child so now it can't be yours either

Responses to the teacher's questions were a result of specific students being called upon to provide an answer:

T: so (.) who wants to start us off? (0.07) ok S7 start us off

On average, there was a 4 second period of silence after the teacher had asked a question before a student would respond. In contrast, students took 1 second or less to respond to a question in the peer-led condition.

### *Humour*

There were four recorded instances of shared humour between the peer educator and students in the peer-led session of SRE.

P.Ed: wank yeah (.) so that's another word for masturbate

S8: there's a lot

((group laughing))

P.Ed: (laughing) there are a lot

No instances of shared humour were recorded in the transcript of teacher-led SRE. Following the question ‘What kind of life would someone with a negative attitude [to sexual relationships] have?’, one student answered ‘they’ll have loads of kids, they’d be at it like rabbits’. The laughter this response evoked from classmates was not shared by the teacher who admonished ‘keep it appropriate please’.

### *Colloquial Language*

There were 15 recorded instances of colloquial language in the peer-led lesson of SRE compared to 2 in the teacher-led condition. Within the teacher-led session these instances were sanctioned, as shown in the following extract after a student had used a colloquial term.

- T: as was agreed in the ground rules (.) it was agreed (.) that the language would be kept appropriate (.) so can we not (.) please?
- S13: I didn’t swear
- T: no but it’s just the general tone
- S15: but
- T: EXCUSE ME
- S14: but he didn’t swear
- T: I’ll see you at the end of the lesson

The inference here is that students were unsure why their classmate was being punished, with the use of colloquial language not thought to be offensive by the peer group. The peer educator did not discipline students for using colloquial language, either allowing the use of such terms or using these incidents to share humour, even when students used language that could be considered inappropriate or taboo:

- S8: what the fuck is that?
- S9: sick (laughs)
- S10: GROSS
- S11: it's horrible
- P.Ed: mhm (0.03) it's not particularly nice is it?

The peer educator's verbalisation signposts to students that they accept and empathise with their feelings on the subject matter. Such an approach could be problematic however as the peer educator's response suggests they are making a value judgement of some kind. This is also present in their response 'unfortunately it's just the girl' to male students' questions about abortion.

In total there were 7 recorded instances of students speaking out in the peer-led session and 24 in the teacher-led session. Across the two conditions 90% of these instances involved only male students.

- T: viral STI's that cannot be cured include hepatitis (.) genital warts (.) and herpes
- S16: HERPES MOUTH
- S15: er:::::::::: SICK (.) THAT'S SICK S16
- S14: imagine that (.) let me kiss you with my HERPES MOUTH (makes kissing noises)
- ((group laughing))

In both conditions male students were observed making noises that had sexual connotations, partaking in sexualised joking and play fighting. Whilst these instances were less frequent in the peer-led condition, this behaviour was more openly enacted with students miming the performance of sexual acts, laughing and making disparaging

noises after fellow students asked questions. There were no instances of speaking out on the part of female students in the peer-led session. All recorded instances of speaking out by female students in the teacher-led condition were complaints made towards male students for their behaviour:

S6: SHUT UP (.) you're all so ANNOYING

S4: MISS (.) they're disturbing us (.) I don't know why they can't all just be QUIET



**Discussion**

It is theorised that students talk more openly when a peer educator delivers SRE. The current study has gone some way towards providing evidence to support this. The willingness of students in the peer-led condition to ask questions and pursue answers is an indication of their engagement with the educator and lesson material. Peer-led students were more likely to answer questions; respond to presented material; broach their own topics of discussion; and debate issues arising from subject matter - all without prompting. In contrast, teacher-led students were less likely to respond to questions and did not volunteer answers or opinions unless personally called on by the teacher. The lengthier response time in the teacher-led session suggests students were reluctant to contribute to discussion and sought to measure their response mindful of the teacher's possible responses. Furthermore, the tolerance of colloquial language, and instances of shared humour between the peer educator and students was more suggestive of open communication. Teacher-led students were more frequently disciplined for engaging in humour or using colloquial language, which reinforced a sense of an authoritarian teacher-pupil relationship. This evidence suggests that communication within the peer-led condition was not only more open, but more frequent, diverse, and egalitarian than that in the teacher-led session. On a more cautionary note however, it appears that there is greater possibility for peer educators' personal attitudes to influence their delivery of SRE as their interaction with students featured more responses that disclosed an underlying personal value system.

*Maintaining 'Law and Order'*

Observed differences in communication between conditions may have been influenced by educators' differing responses towards student behaviour and the techniques they employed to manage this behaviour within the classroom. For instance, greater

tolerance of colloquial language, as observed in the peer-led session, is thought to encourage discussion as students can express their views freely and openly (Forrest et al., 2002; Harrison, 2000). The lack of response in the teacher-led condition could therefore be attributed to the teacher's prohibition of colloquial language. Students appeared to be confused by or resentful of the sanctioning of such language. As a result, students will be wary of speaking in an environment where normally any use of terminology of a sexual nature would be seen as rule breaking (MacDonald et al., 2011; McKee, Watson, & Dore, 2014). Admonishments serve to further reinforce the sense that students are vulnerable and at risk of disciplinary action for discussing subject matter. The use of personal exposure approaches, where specific students were called upon to answer questions by the teacher, remind students they are in the presence of an authority figure they interact with on a daily basis. By using this technique the teacher demonstrates that they know students on a personal level. This may further inhibit open communication as it raises issues of confidentiality, an area of concern for students within the SRE classroom (Hilton, 2003; Selwyn & Powell, 2007), decreasing the likelihood that students will discuss highly sensitive subjects such as sex, relationships, and contraceptive use. Furthermore, being singled out sensitises students to the risk of castigation from teachers or ridicule from classmates (Alldred & David, 2007; Forrest et al., 2002; Lupton & Tulloch, 1996; Selwyn & Powell, 2007). Personal exposure was less likely in the peer-led session as the educator did not know the students well enough to call on them personally. In light of this, it may be that differing levels of acquaintance with an educator will effect student response to SRE. As such any outsider, regardless of whether they are a peer, could encourage more open communication within the SRE classroom. Particular emphasis has been placed on the importance of utilising external speakers within SRE (Emmerson, 2010; Fisher &

McTaggart, 2008; Ofsted, 2013), with the small possibility of re-acquaintance with the educator diminishing confidentiality fears and embarrassment (Forrest et al., 2002).

*Keeping talk 'appropriate'*

The reciprocal use of colloquial language by the peer educator not only served to diminish students' embarrassment and anxiety, but may have been more readily accepted by students due to their similarity in age. Whilst adopting the language of the social group has been successfully utilised as a technique by adult educators, including teachers, such an approach may not be acceptable to the target population (Allred & David, 2007) and risks disapproval from senior staff members within the school (Kehily, 2002). Similarly, humour is sometimes derided as a disruptive force that does not belong within the classroom (Gordon & Gere, 2016). Such a perspective appeared to influence the teacher-led session, where every instance of speaking out was reprimanded. Student humour was not tolerated by the teacher indicating that this was felt to be inappropriate. The reprimands given by the teacher demonstrate defensive teaching within SRE. The teacher responded to sexually-motivated student humour, a 'potentially uncomfortable moment', by exercising strict control (Kehily, 2002, 217). Sharing humour with students, especially that of a sexual nature, threatens teachers' sense of professionalism and heightens personal vulnerability. There is an immediate risk from the students within the classroom who may use such instances to disregard the teacher's authority, accompanied by the danger of professional repercussions from parents, senior school staff and governors outside it. Teachers are held responsible for the educational and, to some degree, the moral development of their students. As such, they must deliver content deemed safe and suitable for the classroom. A responsibility to maintain discipline results in the necessity to command a certain level of respect from pupils. It is not surprising therefore that teacher-led SRE is described as being heavily

regulated (Lawrence, Kanabus, & Regis, 2000). This is achieved through the use of classroom rules such as keeping language appropriate (Buston et al., 2001; Forrest et al., 2004), which was observed in the current study. It may be difficult for both teachers and students to disregard these rules in a one-off session of SRE when they are used on a day-to-day basis throughout the school environment (Alldred & David, 2007).

#### *Humour: help or hindrance*

Upholding an authoritarian teacher-student relationship whilst openly discussing sexual behaviours and participating in the humour that can arise when young people discuss sexual issues is a difficult practice for teachers (Buston et al., 2001; Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Forrest et al., 2004). Whilst humour can be dismissed as misbehaviour, it may also present opportunities to broach sensitive topics with students. The importance of laughter in reducing student discomfort and reinforcing information retention has been acknowledged by practitioners (Gordon & Gere, 2016). This is not to suggest that all instances of inappropriate behaviour should go unsanctioned. As has been recorded elsewhere, male students were considerably more disruptive in SRE than their female counterparts (Buston, Wight, & Hart, 2002; Hilton, 2003; Hilton, 2007; Limmer, 2010; Measor et al., 2000; Strange, Oakley, Forrest, & The RIPPLE Study Team, 2003). Participation within SRE, particularly that of girls, depends on how successful students believe the educator to be in preventing inappropriate remarks and disruptive behaviour (Buston & Wight, 2002). Whilst there were no complaints regarding male behaviour in the peer-led session, the incidents of misbehaviour observed in this condition were of a more serious nature than those in the teacher-led session. Previous studies have noted a lack of disciplinary control when SRE is delivered by peer educators (Forrest et al., 2002). This may have implications for peer-led SRE as such behaviour may discourage student participation (Alldred & David, 2007; Forrest et al., 2002; Langille,

MacKinnon, Marshall, & Graham, 2001; Measor et al., 2000; Strange et al., 2003). In contrast, as the teacher sanctioned misbehaviour immediately and after every instance, female students who were upset by such behaviour could speak out against and draw attention to it.

### *Relationships*

Conversely, it could be argued that the focus on discipline and upholding 'good' behaviour limited opportunities for open communication within teacher-led SRE as this shifts the focus of the interaction onto what may be deemed appropriate within the specific context of teacher-pupil relationships. Within teacher-led SRE, notions of 'teacher' and 'student' identity and the rules used to uphold this relationship, restricted discussion. This is not to argue that all teachers fail to deliver effective SRE, or that the example featured within this study is representative of all teacher-led provision. Rather it demonstrates that some teachers can be inhibited in their delivery of SRE by how they perceive their professional responsibility (Buston et al., 2001). Peer educators, as external visitors to schools, are not subject to the same constraints so can more easily 'rule break' to engage with student discussion on a wider variety of issues related to sexual health.

Response to student behaviour appeared to depend on how the educator identified their role and associated responsibilities within the classroom. In conclusion, perhaps it is not that peer-educators use the same social language as their students (Perry & Grant, 1989), but that peer educators can accept the joking, humour and sometimes misbehaviour that accompanies and helps to accommodate the discussion of sex more easily than a teacher. It has been proposed that communication barriers may be responsible for sexual risk taking behaviours amongst young people (Abel & Fitzgerald, 2006; Coleman, 1999). Peer education, with its success in encouraging more open

communication about sexual issues within the SRE classroom, may assist young people in communicating and negotiating sexual issues with their peers outside the classroom, and is worthy of further investigation.

### ***Limitations and Future Directions***

There are a number of limitations to the present study, foremost amongst which is its limited generalizability to other populations due to the use of a convenience sample. The restricted sample was beneficial however as it enabled the observation of classroom interaction in significant detail. Secondly, as well as being influenced by the presence of an observer, student behaviour may have been effected by a number of internal/external factors that were not controlled for. Whilst participants in both conditions received similar SRE curriculums in similar settings, differences in the culture of schools and peer groups may impact the way students interact with teachers and external visitors. It cannot be assumed that the same social mechanisms were at work in the different classrooms, or that the same social mechanisms could be observed if the study were replicated. Furthermore, definitions of what constitutes a peer vary widely; peer educators may be selected due to characteristics they have in common with the target population, such as age or experience, or the direct opposite, where differences in age or experience are seen as increasing the educator's credibility. This may limit the applicability of research findings to those programmes defining peer educators in a similar way to that of the current study. The age gap between the peer educator and students in this study, may make it more appropriate to label the educator as a 'near-peer'. Questions have been raised concerning whether a 'near-peer' would be identified as a peer by target populations and whether different 'types' of peer educators may produce different effects. Due to the lack of definition of 'peerness', it is impossible to

answer these questions without obtaining the opinion of the target population themselves. It is recommended that future studies utilising forms of peer education should ask target populations to judge not only the acceptability of the educator, but the degree of 'peerness' or affinity felt between audience and educator. To strengthen inferences made from observation data it is advised that student focus groups be conducted to give participants an opportunity to evaluate any interpretation made by the researcher. This may provide deeper insight into the social processes at work within the SRE classroom. Analysis highlighted the possibility that educators may be perceived as being more accessible to students as a consequence of factors aside from their 'peerness'; including their status as an external visitor to the school. Further research to investigate the effect of educator characteristics such as age and gender on student participation in SRE would be useful. Such research could also extend its scope to interrogate how contextual factors such as the subject matter or educational environment may encourage or inhibit open communication. Nevertheless, the study provides valuable first insight into the communicative process between sex educators and their students and how these processes may affect student participation in SRE. Findings may help those responsible for implementing SRE improve content delivery, thereby increasing the uptake of positive attitudes to sexual health and contraceptive use among participants. Whilst the author-constructed measure of open communication awaits construct validation, the development of a research instrument to identify processes that may help or hinder this aspect of SRE provision is a novel feature of the study. It may be a useful tool by which to investigate and evaluate not only peer-led SRE but also a wider range of adolescent health initiatives utilising peer education.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to investigate the concept of open communication within the context of peer-led SRE through comparing educator-student discussion within teacher and peer-led classrooms, with the specific aim of identifying whether interactions between peer educators and students are more open than those with teachers; and if this has consequences for student participation. Findings tentatively support the notion that open communication is specific to peer-led SRE, whilst illuminating some of the discursive processes underlying this interaction and how these processes may encourage or inhibit student participation. It is proposed that notions of what it means to be ‘teacher’ and ‘student’ and the rules used to uphold this relationship within the classroom restrict open communication within teacher-led SRE. Consequently, the creation of spaces where students and teachers can openly discuss issues surrounding sexual health may always be problematic within the school. This raises the question of whether it is the environment or the educator that influences open communication within SRE, and to what degree this interaction is promoted by ‘peerness’ or expedited by educators’ externality.



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