Sex Education on Screen: Power, Pleasure and Moral Panics[1]

Máire Ní Mhórdha
Aneta Stępień
Critical Skills, Maynooth University, Ireland

Abstract

European countries face challenges in integrating comprehensive sex education into their school curricula. While discussions on health risk avoidance and pregnancy prevention are encouraged, the discourse becomes contentious when addressing pleasure, identity, and young people's agency over their bodies and sexuality. Studies (e.g. Miedema 2020) reveal the neglect of crucial aspects like pleasure, power, and gender dynamics in sex education curricula. Focusing on two popular TV series, *Sex Education* (Netflix, 2019-2024) and *Normal People* (Hulu/RTÉ 2019), we argue that post #MeToo media can serve as informal sources of sex education, offering nuanced portrayals of consent, identity, and pleasure, navigating diverse cultural and gender contexts that normalise young people as sexual beings. The selected TV series also address issues of sex education policing in schools, portraying the school as a contested space rife with personal and ideological tensions. The relevance of this analysis is underscored by the influence of manufactured moral panics on policy recommendations (Rasmussen), hindering progress in sexuality literacy amid ongoing culture wars (Hunter 1991).

Les pays européens se heurtent encore à bien des difficultés lorsqu'il s'agit d'élaborer des programmes d'éducation sexuelle complets et adaptables à leurs systèmes éducatifs. Alors qu'on encourage le dialogue autour de la santé et de la prévention des grossesses, les questions relatives au plaisir, à la notion d'identité et à l'autonomie des jeunes vis-à-vis de leur sexualité et de leur corps suscitent des débats houleux. Des recherches (par exemple celle de Miedema en 2020) montrent que les programmes d'éducation à la sexualité omettent encore certains aspects cruciaux tels que le plaisir, la question du pouvoir ou encore celle des dynamiques de genre. Cet article montre, à travers deux séries télévisées populaires, *Sex Education* (Netflix, 2019-2024) et *Normal People* (Hulu/BBC 2019), comment les médias post-#MeToo peuvent servir de source informelle d'éducation à la sexualité. Ils véhiculent en effet des représentations nuancées des notions de consentement, d'identité et de plaisir dans divers contextes culturels et au sein d'une ample gamme d'expressions du genre qui normalisent la sexualité des jeunes. Les séries sélectionnées abordent également la question de la gestion des conflits en matière d'éducation sexuelle dans les écoles, et présentent les établissements scolaires comme des espaces contestés où les tensions personnelles et idéologiques abondent. La pertinence de cette analyse est soulignée par l'influence de paniques morales spécieuses qui ont émergé en réaction à certaines politiques éducatives (Rasmussen), des paniques qui entravent les progrès en matière de sexualité dans un contexte de guerre des valeurs (Hunter 1991).

Keywords

Comprehensive sex education, television, sexual pleasure, young people, sex education pedagogy, gender and sexuality
Éducation complète à la sexualité, télévision, plaisir sexuel, consentement, jeunes, genre et sexualité

In 2020, the UK and Ireland, two European countries with close cultural ties, introduced Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) into their school curricula: in the UK, Relationships, Health and Sex Education (RSE, 2020) and in Ireland, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2019). These new curricula, at least in theory, embrace the principles of CSE, which aims to inform young people about sexual health and rights (United Nations; WHO). In addition to providing information on the legal aspects of sexual health, contraception, disease avoidance, and sexual harassment, greater emphasis is now placed on respectful and nurturing relationships, where diverse gender and sexual identities are taught in an inclusive way. These curricula strive to improve young people's confidence and agency while making decisions regarding relationships and mental health; a basis for life-long wellbeing, as explained in the above documents.

[1] DOI: 10.61736/alizes.123/44/04.

Many challenges exist in implementing these ambitious and egalitarian models of sex education, some of which are hinted at in the language of the governmental guidelines for schools. Exploring these challenges provides crucial insights into formal sex education and the most contested topics and areas of exploration within sex education. For example, the UK's RSE indicates that teaching sexual orientation and gender identity must acknowledge that young people may be in the process of discovering their identity and that this, as well as same-sex relationships, "should be integrated appropriately into the RSE programme, rather than addressed separately or in only one lesson" (Statutory Guidance). This suggests a change of culture and thinking about sexuality, gender and relationships in schools, in addition to the new teaching pedagogy. The lack of specific detail on when to introduce individual topics ("content should be age-appropriate"), and the depth required to explore sexual and gender identity "in a clear, sensitive and respectful manner" in the classroom (ibid.), effectively leave these decisions up to individual schools and, frequently, to individual teachers' discretion (Miedema 757; Calvert).

Other challenges include a lack of adequate teacher preparation and confidence; studies show that sex educators' preparation and knowledge are key to young people's engagement with relationships and sex education programmes; young people "overwhelmingly" expressed the desire for a comfortable, non-judgmental environment with comprehensive content delivered by knowledgeable professionals (Corcoran *et al*. 96). As Pound et al. highlight in their review of school-based sex education in ten countries, informed, confident educators enable safe, non-judgemental classroom environments where students can ask questions and raise concerns allowing for active participation of students (7). Only such participation can render the desired results.

Educators also may have to face parents and faith communities, who contest aspects of the compulsory RSE curriculum[2]. Notably, the UK's RSE guidelines recommend including parents and local communities in conversations on sex education: "all schools should work closely with parents when planning and delivering these subjects" (Relationships Education 17). Indeed, the language and framing of the Irish NCCA report express anxiety and concern not to offend or alienate those who may be disputing the contents of the programme, alongside concrete, expertise-based understandings. Elements of the curriculum that relate specifically to young people's pleasure, consent, agency or bodily boundaries, in particular, have provoked moral panics, some of them through manufactured online campaigns by conservative politicians and activists (Martínez et al. 20) that portray the tenets of comprehensive sex education as a dangerous "ideology" (Miedema et al. 751). These hostile attitudes towards CSE can hinder the implementation of quality sex education in schools; school-based sex education was found to be inadequate across multiple cultural contexts (Pound et al. 1; Edwards 267).

Recognising the above limitations, young people rely on informal sources of information about sex, sexuality and gender identities, including from TV and film, where they turn to acquire "sexual scripts" and models of sexual and romantic encounters (O'Hara, 322; Edwards 272). While new digital technologies offer greater independence and agency in selecting and navigating online content based on information needs, they also involve "new risks for young people" (Pound et al. 1). Research shows that pornography has become a leading source of information for predominantly male teenagers aged 13-18 (Dawson et al; see also Rothman and Adhia 1). When consumed uncritically at a young age, pornography can be a source of misinformation about sexual expression and relationships (Allen and Lavender-Stott 403) and may fuel gender-based violence (Lim et al. 3; Quadara). However, when used in an informed

[2] A legal challenge to the RSE curriculum was raised by a group of parents in Wales (UK), and ultimately rejected by the High Court. This lawsuit was followed by Welsh politicians criticising the new WHO sex education guidelines (Sex Education Legal Challenge).

and guided way, media sources can provide an important basis for critical reflection on young people's lived experiences of, sexual and non-sexual, relationships. As we demonstrate, programmes such as Netflix's *Sex Education* (2019-2024) and BBC/Hulu's *Normal People* (2020) can act as insightful, entertaining sources of sex education for young audiences, given their diverse and nuanced portrayals of adolescent a/sexual relationships across the intersection of genders, sexualities, ethnicities, classes, and (dis)abilities[3].

The 12-episode coming-of-age drama *Normal People* is based on the novel of the same title by Sally Rooney, which *The Guardian* newspaper described as "a Salinger for the Snapchat generation" referring to her portrayal of adolescent relationships (Cain 2018). The show attracted millions of viewers in Ireland and the UK, mainly among people aged 16-34, with *Normal People* surpassing many Netflix shows (RTE). By foregrounding sexual pleasure, desire, and consent, these programmes challenge the hegemonic gendered, cis-centred and heteronormative representations of romantic and sexual relationships in films (Stępień and Ní Mhórdha 2023, 48).

While *Normal People* and *Sex Education* differ significantly in their style – with *Sex Education* portraying a "teenage utopia" that blends English and American culture (Henman) and *Normal People* tending towards realism – both are extremely valuable in their portrayal of gender and sexual dynamics, in the context of familial, religious, socioeconomic and class constraints, issues that proved to be the most challenging areas within the CSE. By foregrounding communication, respect and acceptance of autonomy as the basis of all relationships, these shows provide rich educational material, relatable to the majority of adolescents within the English-speaking world and beyond[4].

This paper also shows how these productions align with the call for greater inclusivity of diverse sexual experiences, including LBGTQ+ identities, and relatability within recent comprehensive sex education frameworks (Miedema 753; United Nations; WHO). While the expertise based CSE framework should underpin sex education curricula, we argue that educators can capitalise on the pedagogical potential of informal sources in young people's learning about relationships, building on the knowledge that students already have through accessing those sources. As such, this article suggests a new approach to school sex education, one that incorporates contemporary film, TV and other popular cultural representations that reflect young people's lived experiences and modern-day concerns brought to the fore by the #MeToo movement[5]. This includes new sensibilities and expectations of the portrayal of sex and intimate relationships on and off screen, most vocally expressed by Gen Z commentators (Rivas-Lara *et*

---

[3] The educational value of *Sex Education* was noted by parents and teenagers on Common Sense, an American, non-profit media organisation, which gathers reviews from parents and adolescents to help the parents evaluate the age-appropriateness of the TV shows using common sense, rather than the recommended ratings. Among 180 responses of Kids 14+, the majority gave the highest value to Educational value, followed by Great role models, and Great messages, hinting at the positive portrayal of sexuality. Parents, many of whom could be described as Millennials, overwhelmingly had similar views with many parents expressing a kind of sadness at not being given the opportunity to receive such a positive and healthy message about body, sexuality and pleasure at a younger age. (Parents' Guide to Sex Education)

[4] These features, universal for healthy and respectful relationships, render the show relatable to adolescents of very different cultural contexts. For example, a Polish sex therapist, Anna Jurek recommended the show to support sex education classes in Polish schools, commenting that, while the reality in the film is different to Polish reality, the problems teenagers face are credible and realistic due to its focus on emotions, like fear and embarrassment, but also due to intersectionality that captures a wide variety of identities (Grodziński).

[5] The #MeToo movement began in 2006 as a grassroots movement that aided the survivors of sexual assault in underprivileged communities. It is credited to an African American activist, Tarana Burke. After a viral Tweet by Alyssa Milano about the abuse and sexual harassment by Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein in 2017, the movement sparked a worldwide discussion about sexual violence and consent. The movement emphasises the need to speak out about abuse as a way of exposing the systemic violence, patriarchal structures and the persistence of power imbalances within the private and public spheres (Ghadery).

al.).
By analysing sex and intimacy on screen through a feminist lens exploring the cultural and social aspects that contribute to young people's developing sexuality and sense of self, we show the value and the need for critical engagement with informal sources in stimulating conversation and breaking taboos around young people's sex and sexuality. As Alice Thacker noted in her discussion on *Normal People*, TV shows can be extremely effective in disrupting normative narratives of gender and sexuality, thanks to their relatable depictions of contemporary life that reflect "elements of our own personal lives". Such productions therefore have the scope to address another important RSE recommendation, that "all pupils should feel that the content is relevant to them and their developing sexuality" (Statutory Guidance).
Furthermore, since entertainment media are widely accessible, they can bridge potential knowledge gaps between school sex educators and parents who may each inadvertently transmit mixed messages to young people. Like teachers, parents can struggle with confidence and lack of knowledge themselves, unsure "how to raise the topic of sex before it is necessary" (Allen and Lavender-Stott 395). However, as vehicles for storytelling, film and TV shows can assume the role of an additional "peer" to support parent-child conversations. Below, we discuss the scholarship on both shows, demonstrating how they closely align with the principles of CSE.
Research on *Sex Education* has suggested that young viewers, and parents alike, praised "the comprehensive details it offers about sexual issues forbidden in their own cultures," presented in a non-judgemental way (Allen 2023, 2; see also Dudek 503). *Normal People* has been applauded for its focus on communication and critical examination of consent that considers likely power imbalances (Stępień and Ní Mhórdha). In addition to presenting teenagers as agents of their sexual lives and normalising youth sexual desire, the shows engage with questions of the policing of sex and gender norms in schools (Shields and Ringrose 8; Bollas 52-3), with the school as a contested space where personal and ideological tensions play out. In the digital world, where the margins around personal boundaries, consent, and intimacy are often blurred, specific cinematic examples can support critical and nuanced discussions on complex issues, such as consent, in relation to gender power dynamics, self-discovery and pleasure, issues that are frequently overlooked in formal educational frameworks.

Screen Productions as an Informal Source of Sexual Knowledge: Teenage Desire and Consent

The centrality of informal sources for young people in acquiring knowledge about sexual and romantic relationships has been studied since the 1980s. Scholars discussed the primary influence the "new media" assumed in the sphere of the sexual knowledge of teenagers, over their peers and parents. Strause and Faber went as far as to state that formal sex education programmes "failed to achieve their intended purpose of promoting responsible sexual behaviour" in teenagers (251). According to the authors, it was precisely because informal sources exerted a more powerful influence, while often providing young people with contradictory messages to those they received in school or from their parents. They concluded that "knowledge alone does not motivate intended behavioural action" (253), a claim that points to the role of identification and relatability that media plays in portraying different relationship scenarios. Studies also noted the untapped pedagogical potential of the experiences and information young people already have, as Henry Giroux and Roger Simon argued:

> Educators who refuse to acknowledge popular culture as a significant basis of knowledge often devalue students by refusing to work with the knowledge that students actually have and so eliminate the possibility of developing a pedagogy that links school knowledge to the differing subject relations that help to constitute their everyday lives (295).

Research indicates the impact of media messaging, particularly film, in the construction of young people's sexualities, as they "convey the cultural scripts for a variety of social norms, including norms of gender and of sexualities" (Smith 322). Movies provide adolescents with patterns of behaviour, or "sexual scripts" (O'Hara 985), which they emulate in their own intimate encounters. Issues can arise, however, from the uncritical consumption of mainstream media, which, with a few exceptions, portray romantic and/or sexual relationships from a gendered, predominantly, heteronormative male perspective (Smith 325), marginalising the experiences of "girls of color, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) girls" and girls from disadvantaged backgrounds (Stewart et al. 253). Regarding consent, studies found that mainstream films tend to portray consent communication as "irrelevant", with nonverbal, implicit cues of consent giving, or its refusal; a patriarchal legacy with potential legal, social, and personal implications (Jozkowski *et al*. 760).

Notably, the literature underlines the discrepancy and double standards in representing male and female sexuality, desire and pleasure on screen, particularly before #MeToo. While male heterosexual desire features as something natural and celebrated, adolescent girls must navigate primarily sex-negative messages from media and their environment. Smith's analysis of film scripts (2000-2009) in relation to teen girls' sexual desire, found that these desires were generally unspoken, that girls verbalising their desires were portrayed as ''bad girls," and were likely to face negative consequences (321). A similar conclusion was drawn from research on teen girls of colour in America who spoke about "overwhelmingly negative" messages about female sexuality within popular culture, from parents and teachers (Stewart et al. 258). They noted the implied expectation on girls to practise restraint in sexual relationships; to be the "gatekeepers of sex", with society being more open "to boys being more free" about their sexual pursuits. Significantly, the main concern of the teen female participants was "the lack of educating boys" that "no" means "no" (262).

The obscuring of issues of consent, female desire and pleasure on screen, has been mirrored in the notable absence of these topics in the sex education curricula (Goldfarb and Lieberman 23). Teenage girls face pressures linked to heteronormative feminine ideologies that stress qualities such as attending to other people's needs, while also being the "responsible" party when it comes to safe sex, e.g. provision of consent, and the use of contraception (Martinez 6). In the absence of essential discourse on female desire and pleasure, "girls are left to respond to gendered sexual norms that encourage boys to disregard girls' agency in favour of pursuing their own sexual desires, while girls are encouraged to abstain," thus reinforcing "dangerous gendered sexual dynamics" (Stewart et al. 263). Gendered, heteronormative stereotypes restrict the sexuality of adolescent girls, as well as nonbinary and LGBTQ+ persons, on and off screen.

The transformative influence of the #MeToo phenomenon on contemporary teen films can be seen in the greater focus on teenage girls' sexual identity, including queer girls and girls of colour, as protagonists pursuing sex "entitled to sexual agency and pleasure" (Meek 71). However, as Meek observes in her study *Consent Culture and Teen Films: Adolescent Sexuality in US Movies* (2023), many recent teen films (from 2018 onwards) neglect issues of consent. Despite the evident shift to explorations of female, nonbinary and gay sexual desire, Meek found the treatment of sexual consent problematic: "Girls are still shown navigating subtle and not-so-subtle coercion, while boys often are portrayed as always already consenting. Queer teens are depicted forcing themselves into unpleasant heterosexual encounters, and trans youth are shown subjugated by parents who control decisions about their gender-affirming care" (2). These findings underline the need for critical examination of how gendered sexual norms create power imbalances that can undermine positive sexuality development in young people of all genders, including the ability to give, refuse or withdraw consent.

Some studies demonstrated the positive impact of informal sources in validating young people

as sexual beings, with agency over their bodies and sexual desire (or a lack of it). Edwards discussed the positive impact of critically informed, sex-positive, sources, which express feminist values, i.e. espousing "consideration for active expressions of female desire, female pleasure, queer sexual identities", on women across different generations (267). There is also an increased awareness of the importance of not normalising sexual pleasure, and not (re)enforcing the "pleasure imperative," i.e. a pressure to have or feel sexual pleasure, with studies suggesting a critical approach to discussions on "values surrounding sexual pleasure in society and culture" (Wood et al. 1). Sex education in formal settings, argues Edwards, should consider introducing information that young people "consider relevant to themselves" and use their voices to "dictate what kind of sexual knowledge they [young people] require most" (267). Netflix's *Sex Education* is essentially based on this premise, by building the story around teenagers voicing their sexual feelings and concerns in a make-shift school "sex clinic" run by a school peer, Otis. As previously discussed, the show's stories challenge the heteronormative script of sexual dynamics and consent communication that dominates in mainstream films. This and another post-#MeToo production, *Normal People* discussed here, explicitly focus on communicating consent, agency, and respect in intimate relationships. Their storylines include a range of factors that come into complex interplay in sexual scenarios "encompassing themes of consent, inexperience, self-discovery, apprehension and (gender) performance anxiety, through a diverse lens of cultural perspectives. Yet, optimistically, these issues can be resolved through open communication and respect for boundaries" (Stępień and Ní Mhórdha 59).

Sex and Relationships on Screen

Ireland's NCCA report highlights that young people seek sex education that discusses emotions and relationships, stating that they find the current focus too biological: "within both primary and post-primary contexts students are unhappy with RSE that focuses mainly on biological facts (for primary students 'the talk' and for post-primary students, information on conception, contraception, STIs) and fails to provide opportunities to discuss the emotional aspects of growing up and forming healthy relationships" (NCAA 25). Sex education programmes in general "have failed epically to prepare young people for the tender, subtle, courageous work of learning how to love someone else" (Todd).

As outlined above, film and TV are frequently cited as a source of information for young people about sexuality, and their connection to the development of sexual identity is of interest to media scholars. Davis and Dickinson argue that the relationship between these mediated worlds and identity formation is an integral part of how an individual constructs their sense of self throughout late adolescence and emerging adulthood (4). Sex educators have noted that the issues portrayed in shows such as *Sex Education* are highly relatable to young people, stating that the series is "very credible" in its representation of the challenges they face, lauding its diverse, inclusive and intersectional approach to growing up, body issues, emotions and sexuality (Grodziński). Indeed, the range of experience and comfort levels with sex portrayed in *Sex Education* is in fact far more realistic than media portrayals of adolescent sexual activity would suggest, with the percentage of teenagers aged 14 to 17 in the U.S. engaging in sexual activity declining, over the period 2009 to 2018 (Herbenick *et al*. 1419).

Sex Education's main protagonist is Otis, an inexperienced teenage boy (whose mother is a sex therapist), who sets up an informal sex education clinic at his school, Moordale High. Teenage clients at the clinic speak frankly and anonymously about their queries and challenges, enabling non-judgmental, information based, taboo-busting conversations. The show therefore raises awareness and informs audiences about little-known conditions such as vaginismus. Showrunner Laurie Nunn reported that following this episode, young people got in touch with her to say it had helped them realise they may have the condition, and that they

had been to see a doctor as a result: "it actually felt like there was something that was educational in the show that went out and actually did have an effect on people's lives" (Lawton and Collins). Nunn also received positive feedback on the character Aimee's experience of, and response to, sexual assault, based on Nunn's own experience. Important lessons from *Sex Education* include: the importance of gender expression and inclusion, the destigmatisation of sexual pleasure and masturbation, communication about consent, how to properly portray characters with disabilities, and the need to have healthy conversations about boundaries that help young people to navigate relationships in general, including sexual relationships.

Engaging, realistic sex education that meets the needs of teenagers is vital, particularly given the online radicalisation of young men by misogynistic social media personalities such as Andrew Tate who, as noted by an Ireland-based journalist, Brianna Parkins, "is filling a vacuum left by parents who don't want to have awkward talks with their sons about women" (Parkins). The influence of Tate and others speaks to the need for guidance and authority in the sphere of relationships and the failure of schools to meet the needs of adolescents to discuss "real-world" topics and concerns. These include LGBTQ+ identities and sexual orientations, consent, "the pressures that lead to sexual activity … the reasons for sexual activity," and the "emotional aspects of growing up and forming healthy relationships," with an emphasis on respect (National Council/Report on the Review 17-25).

Sex Education exemplifies the power of TV to depict intersectional representations of young people's lives. Its storylines present nuanced portrayals of discovering personal identity, showing key aspects to understanding sexuality, gender, and relationships with friends and family. The characters remain relatable, facing problems that many teenagers deal with, while still focusing on key components of individual experience that ring true for individual audience members. The character of Cal, a non-binary student and person of colour, introduced in season 3, exemplifies this. Cal uses they/them pronouns and struggles with the uniforms put in place by the new headmistress at Moordale, who scolds them for not wearing the "appropriate" attire. The uniform is problematic for all the school's non-binary and gender non-conforming students, who are not only forced to conform to the gendered dress code, but are also made to choose between the line for "boys" and the one for "girls," and are taught about reproductive health in a very gendered way, that discounts their identity and can cause severe distress and trauma (Neary and Cross 7).

Sex Education's focus thus is not only on sex, but the totality of being young and the experience of growing into yourself through the lens of various identities and backgrounds. Its characters experience individual struggles that affect the way they think and act within the world around them. Sexuality is one aspect of this, but the series also provides a commentary on the socio-economic barriers facing young people who are supporting themselves or their families (the character of Maeve is a truly bright and engaged student who has no parental support), and different family structures (Jackson and his two mothers), as well as different abilities (Isaac uses a wheelchair, while Aisha has a hearing impairment). *Sex Education*'s focus is on intimacy, relationships, interpersonal experiences within the vast range of identities and challenges that young people growing up experience and makes the stories widely relatable. We see the characters grow and change, supported by one another. Its power lies in the gap that it fills in formal sex education.

Changing Norms and Expectations Around Representation of Sex After #MeToo

Recent research describes changing cultural norms and expectations among Generation Z (people born between 1997 and 2012) in relation to sex, both on and off screen (Rivas-Lara et al.). Young people increasingly value friendships over sexual relationships, moving away from

traditional expectations around marriage and having children. "We want to break away from the dominant narrative in film and TV where meaningful relationships must be rooted in sex," says 23-year-old Yernur in Rivas-Lara et. al' study. Almost half of research participants aged 13 to 24 said explicit sex scenes were not needed to advance storylines on screen. "When these scenes aren't necessary it feels like voyeurism, and it feels invasive to the character's intimacy and private life," says 22-year-old Livia.

Normal People, an acclaimed television series, explores themes of adolescent love, relationships, and intimacy, employing the above principles. The series focuses on the complex dynamics of the relationship between Connell and Marianne, two teenagers in rural Ireland, as they navigate love, friendship, and intimacy. *Normal People* has been praised for its realistic portrayal of human connections, including its handling of sexual consent – offering a nuanced approach to the dynamics of consent within the context of an evolving and often tumultuous relationship (Stępień and Ní Mhórdha 48). The show goes beyond mere physicality, delving into emotional and psychological aspects of consent, while highlighting the importance of clear communication and mutual understanding.

Gen Z is also often characterised by its more open and accepting attitude towards diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. Members of this generation tend to be more inclusive and supportive of LGBTQ+ rights, challenging traditional norms and expectations surrounding sexuality (ibid.). Furthermore, the digital age has played a significant role in shaping Gen Z's perceptions of sex and relationships. Easy access to information through the internet, social media, and dating apps has led to more conversations about sex and relationships. Young people are more likely to seek information online and connect with others who share similar experiences. Gen Z is increasingly pushing for more inclusive representation of sex and relationships in the media. There is a demand for diverse and authentic portrayals of sexual experiences that reflect the variety of identities and orientations within the population (ibid.). Production processes are now beginning to match these developments; *Sex Education* was the first Netflix show to employ intimacy coordinators (Ates).

The #MeToo movement contributed to critical reflection on how the male-dominated film and TV industry translated into the prevalence of the male gaze, marginalising disproportionately non-male and non-heterosexual identities in these visual media. The movement has also contributed to a rise in female directors in the industry, "allow[ing] space for the feminine gaze to be used as a lens for perception that pushes back against hegemonic norms pertaining to gender and sexuality" (Riebe). The nine-minute scene when Connell and Marianne first have sex in *Normal People* (directed by Lenny Abrahamson and Hettie Macdonald), exemplifies this shift to more nuanced explorations of female sexuality, female gaze and desire that also centre on verbal communication of consent, not just at the start of love making but throughout. The show also explores the impact of power dynamics on consent, as Connell and Marianne navigate the evolving nature of their relationship. Later in the series, Marianne engages with BDSM, including bondage and the infliction of pain (episode 7). It is worth noting, that the main criticism directed at the show by the Irish audience, focused on the portrayal of the 17-year-old Marianne's sexual behaviour, described by some as inappropriate, promiscuous or even "filthy" (O'Connor 2020), a reaction which confirms the show's mission described by critics as "exposing the dark masks of the patriarchy" (A Feminist Take on 'Normal People')[6].

The strength of *Sex Education* and *Normal People* in relation to sex education for teens lies in their depiction of open communication between characters about their experiences, concerns, and questions related to sex and relationships. They can serve as a model for healthy

[6] The show also received critique in relation to its sex negative portrayal of BDSM, implying an association between it and trauma and abuse, in contrast to prevailing BDSM principles of "safe, sane consensual" sex, see Stępień and Ní Mhórdha 2023, 56.

communication and encourage students to feel more comfortable discussing these topics with educators, peers, or parents. *Sex Education*, due to its inclusion of non-heteronormative and non-binary characters in particular, challenges stereotypes and breaks down stigmas surrounding various aspects of sexuality. The shows also expose and problematise the patriarchal norms, e.g. by demonstrating how violence against women is normalized (Aimee's sexual assault in episode 2 of *Sex Education* and Marianne facing domestic violence in *Normal People*), and toxic masculinity accepted. These examples can become a rich source for class discussions on complex power dynamics and the prevalence of the traditional gender roles and hierarchies. This can contribute to creating a more inclusive and accepting environment in schools, fostering empathy and understanding among students. Incorporating discussions about these issues in sex education programs can help students develop a more holistic view of their own well-being. The series also explores the dynamics between parents and their teenage children, depicting the challenges and misunderstandings that can arise.

Sex Education and Manufactured Moral Panics

These respectful, nuanced depictions of young people's experiences of sexuality and identity contrast with a growing backlash and emerging moral panics around comprehensive sex education in Europe. The notion of moral panics first emerged from sociologist Stanley Cohen's work on the confrontations between mods and rockers, during which he identified the media's critical role in presenting events and people as "threats to societal values and interests … in a stylised and stereotypical fashion" (Cohen 21). Moral panics often arise in response to perceived threats to traditional values or social norms. When these panics are deliberately engineered or manipulated for political or ideological purposes, they can be considered manufactured moral panics.

Europe has seen several instances of manufactured moral panics surrounding comprehensive sex education. These panics typically involve claims that sex education programmes promote promiscuity, undermine traditional values, or expose children to inappropriate content. Such claims are often unsubstantiated or based on selective interpretation of evidence. In 2019, a proposed law known as the "Stop Paedophilia" bill was introduced by a group of citizens in the Polish Parliament. This bill suggested implementing severe penalties, including imprisonment, for individuals within educational settings who, it was claimed, promoted or condoned sexual activity by minors (Council of Europe). In the autonomous region of Murcia in Spain, parents can now request that their children be exempted from certain classes offered by outside educators if they feel that the subject matter or the instructors do not align with their beliefs on specific issues, thereby potentially limiting children's access to education on sex and relationships, as well as other content related to human rights education, since these topics are often taught by external parties as part of the regular curriculum (ibid.). In September 2023, 2,000 people demonstrated in Brussels against the so-called Evras (Éducation à la Vie Relationelle, Affective et Sexuelle) decree. The protests, reported to be predominantly from religious sectors of society (Roman Catholic and Islamic), centred on fears that children would "learn how to masturbate and watch porn" as part of their compulsory education (*The Brussels Times*).

Ireland has seen a large increase in demonstrations of manufactured moral panics against the updated sex education curriculum, particularly in the post-pandemic era. As one teacher who attended an "information night" in September 2023 on the topic noted:

> Although there was lots of high emotion, the wringing of hands, the ridiculing of the LGBTQIA+ community, teachers being referred to as predators and groomers, calls for political resignations, false claims of what children are to be taught, the purporting of conspiracy theories involving the agenda of childless government ministers,

> climate change denial and the sterilisation of children, what was clearly lacking, was any evidence-based argument upon which the speakers could rely on to back up their claims (Cleary).

Similarly, as Houghton and Houghton (2023) report, libraries in Ireland have been targeted by far-right agitators in apparent copycat protests to similar attempts to ban books on LGBTQ+ subjects in the United States. Staff and the public have been filmed and aggressively confronted, and LGBTQ+ books have been torn up, as protestors propagate baseless and largely unconnected conspiracy theories. Such reactions are equally prevalent in the UK, with Conservative MP Miriam Cates claiming in March 2023 that "relationship and sex education in schools is a 'safeguarding scandal'," in her factually inaccurate claims in Parliament about the content of the national sex education programme (Waugh).

Sex and Gender Policing in the Schoolyard

One cannot understand sexuality without reference to gender (United Nations). *Sex Education* and *Normal People* both critically examine the school as a site of policing cis-centred, heteronormative sex and gender norms, where personal and ideological tensions play out. *Normal People* portrays a hostile school environment – the story is set at Hartstown Community School in the West of Ireland – where Marianne is branded by boys as "ugly" and "flat-chested," and mocked for thinking she is "too good for them" (episodes 1-3). These insults convey a traditional heterosexual perspective, where women are viewed as vessels for the satisfaction of heterosexual male desire (Mulvey 245). The striking contrast between Connell's behaviour when with Marianne, and how he hides their relationship from his peers in high school (i.e. in front of Marianne's bullies) shows how school can be a site of the policing, and upholding of heterosexual sex and gender norms, with violence and harassment ensuing when these norms are transgressed.

The difference between Connell's behaviour towards Marianne in public and in private illustrates the effects of peer pressure on gender performance and how this can hinder self-expression, expression of feelings towards others and personal happiness. While this can help the audiences to understand Connell's motivations, it should not be used to excuse it. In his excellent analysis of Connell as a "new Irish man," Angelos Bollas argued how, through the character of Connell, *Normal People* "manages to challenge established notions of [heterosexual] masculinity" (52). Significantly, Connell is part of the G.A.A. (Gaelic Athletic Association, est. 1884) sport club, whose role has been linked to specific, masculinized and nationalistic, manifestations of Irish identity, as can be found in the 2018 GAA Official Guide: "The primary purpose of the G.A.A. is the organisation of native pastimes and the promotion of athletic fitness as a means to create a disciplined, self-reliant, national minded manhood" (4). While Connell's character indeed expands the notion of traditional masculinity to include gentle and caring aspects, he also plays into stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity, including the need to dominate and control (Stępień 12). Through his public silence about their relationship, he effectively controls and dominates Marianne emotionally, implying that he is ashamed of her, including when he fails to stand up for Marianne when other boys taunt her (episode 3). This hidden relationship epitomises what Dobson and Ringrose call "the discourse of silence and illegibility around teenage female desires," which upholds the gender power dichotomy (13). In addition, Marianne suffers domestic abuse at the hands of her violent brother, thus viewers see how these two young male characters project their own masculine insecurities onto Marianne.

The value of *Normal People* as an informal source of critical discussion about interpersonal relationships lies in its illustration of how issues such as socioeconomic context, patriarchal

values, class, and mental health can influence romantic and sexual relationships. This is most poignantly observed in the reversed power dynamic when Marianne and Connell leave their small-town environment and start university in a city in episode 4, with Marianne now flourishing academically and socially, while Connell struggles to adjust to his new environment. The change of attitudes when the pair are "not subjected to the expectations of others" and are free to show their affection, exposes the constraints of the social norms of sexuality and gender, hegemonic masculinity in particular, on women and those "who do not conform to heteronormative ideals" (Bolas 56-57). Through Connell, *Normal People* confronts society's expectations of masculinity in many ways. This includes when he shows "uneasiness" with his own behaviour towards Marianne, is proactive in addressing his mental health issues, and his normalisation of traditionally feminine traits as legitimate male attributes, e.g. vulnerability, emotional support, and expressions of love, all of which gain him respect and appreciation (Bolas 55).

Sex Education normalises teen sex and sexuality by enabling discussions on an unlimited range of topics at Otis's sex clinic. The show engages with contemporary sexual politics (queer politics, racism, feminism, ableism and poverty (Frost)) by the creative use of the school as a space where students' contemporary concerns and needs clash with the out-of-touch, moralistic and dated approaches of conservative school Principals. Students' efforts to introduce honest conversations about sexuality and relationships are constantly suppressed, e.g. by Hope, the new headmistress at Moordale, who aims to turn the school into a "sex-free campus". She instigates practices such as showing videos of women giving birth, aiming to instil fear of sex and pregnancy in female students. This suggests a return to the ABC (Abstain, Be Faithful, use a Condom) model of sex education that emerged as a response to the spread of HIV starting in the 1980s. It is the young people in the show who emerge as responsible, mature and aware of their information needs. The growing scholarship on *Sex Education* emphasises how the show legitimises young people as sexual beings with agency over their sexual lives (Stępień and Ní Mhórdha, "Consent and Adolescent" 47; Allen 2023, 8; Frost).

"Addressing the critique of heteronormativity that students make of school-based programmes, *Sex Education* is also primarily queer-positive," notes Louisa Allen (2). Cavendish College, the new school introduced in season 4, proves to be a radical change given that it is student-led and rights-based. Moordale High (the setting of seasons 1-3) was already, according to showrunner Laurie Nunn, a kind of "teenage utopia" that would appeal to trans-Atlantic audiences through the blending of English and American cultural references (Henman), and "representations of sexual and gender identity as unremarkable and taken for granted in everyday life" (Allen 2023 10). Cavendish, however, goes a step further in imagining a school that not only facilitates conversations about teenage sex and relationships but enacts the values that comprehensive sex education calls for: inclusivity, respect, honesty and acceptance of diversity. Cavendish therefore epitomises what the "change of culture" called for by Sarah Calvert could look like. When students know how to build healthy relationships, how to avoid sexual harassment and violence and feel supported within their school environment, "they are more likely to experience academic success, a foundation for future stability" (Goldfarb and Lieberman 22).

Conclusion

The politicisation of relationships and sex education, combined with parental pressure and anti-sex education activism, can significantly impact the quality and content of formal school sex education in Europe. Sex education can become a battleground for political and ideological differences, with various interest groups advocating for their perspectives to be included or excluded from school curricula. This can lead to limited or biased approaches that neglect essential aspects of CSE, such as contraception, LGBTQ+ experiences, and consent. Anti-sex

education activism, often driven by moral or religious convictions, can further restrict the scope of formal sex education. This can limit students' access to accurate and comprehensive information. In some cases, fear of controversy can lead educators to avoid important discussions altogether, creating a gap in students' understanding of their own bodies, relationships, and sexual health.

If sex education curricula are to respond to the changing world of young people, with increased media consumption, the earlier physical development of children (Calvert) and the new reality of digital sex culture ("sext education," Dobson & Ringrose), they must be accompanied by credible informal sources, such as the TV shows discussed here, that can provide diverse, complex and relatable portrayals of relationships, mirroring the realities and concerns of today's youth. As the discussion here demonstrated, young people turn to informal sources, such as online platforms, social media, and entertainment media, to fill the gaps in their knowledge about important but absent aspects of how to navigate their relationships and their developing sexuality. Some media productions, such as television shows, movies, and online content, offer diverse scenarios related to relationships and sexuality, providing relatable examples for young people. Adequate selection, for example taking into consideration the feminist principles of representations of sexuality in film discussed above, and critical consumption of these media are essential to avoid emulating stereotypes and prejudices.

As demonstrated here, the screen industry can respond to social and cultural shifts such as #MeToo by placing careful consideration on what values are represented on screen (and the ethical issues off-screen) as well as trying to include a broader spectrum of identities and relationships. The growing scholarship on productions such as *Sex Education* and *Normal People* indicates the usefulness and value of these popular programmes as supplemental material for formal sex education classes, and their compatibility with the principles of the CSE. Both shows present engaging narratives on complex power dynamics within relationships, challenging normative representations of gender roles and sexual pleasure while offering valuable glimpses into the concerns and experiences of teenagers in the post-#MeToo era[7]. While using these sources, teachers, parents, and educators should consider the pedagogical potential of students' voices and experiences while critically examining these productions for their insight on real-life situations, promoting communication on consent and healthy relationships.

Bibliography

"A Feminist Take on 'Normal People'," *That's What She Said*, June 18, 2020, https://twssmagazine.com/2020/06/18/a-feminist-take-on-normal-people/.

Allen, Katherine R., and Erin S. Lavender-Stott. "Family Contexts of Informal Sex Education: Young Men's Perceptions of First Sexual Images," *Family Relations*, vol. 64, no. 3, 2015, p. 393-406.

Allen, Louisa. "What Can the Netflix Series Sex Education Teach School-Based Sexuality Education?" *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, 2023, p. 1-19.

Aruah, Diane Chidimma Ezeh. "Sexual Health on Television: New Framing of Sexual Health Issues in Netflix's Sex Education Show," *The Journal of Public Interest Communications*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2021, p. 48-48.

[7] Other coming-of-age productions with a focus on love and relationships that are worth considering are a British TV series *Heartstopper* (2022), a Swedish series *Young Royals* (2021-2024), which touch upon queer love as well as class issues (in case of Young Royals), or a recent film by Molly Manning Walker, *How to Have Sex* (2023) that focuses on the peer pressure of having sex, issues of consent and respect of boundaries. For more recommendations of teen films see Screen Crush. "The 10 Most Sex-Positive Teen Series on Streaming" (Works Cited section).

Ates, Alex. “Intimacy Directors Should Be on More Sets, Says SAG-AFTRA,” *Backstage*. 19 October 2019, https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/sag-aftra-intimacy-director-on-set-standard-68685/.

Barry, Aoife. “Why the Conversation Around Normal People’s Sex Scenes Shows how Ireland has Changed,” *The Journal*, 20 October 2023, https://www.thejournal.ie/sex-scenes-normal-people-ireland-reaction-5089739-May2020/.

Bollas, Angelos. “Normal People (2020) and the New Post-Celtic Irish Man,” *The Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2022, p. 50-59.

Calvert, Sarah. “New RSE Guidelines Pose Serious Challenges for Schools,” *Teaching Times*, 3 March 2020, https://www.teachingtimes.com/new-rse-guidelines-pose-serious-challenges-for-schools/.

Cain, Sian. “Sally Rooney Teaches Us Millennials Should Be Written About, Not Ridiculed,” *The Guardian*, September 5, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/sep/05/sally-rooney-millennials-normal-people.

Children’s Commissioner for England. “‘A Lot of it is Actually Just Abuse’: Young People and Pornography,” 2023.

Cohen, S. Folk. *Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, Routledge, 2002.

Corcoran, Jessica L., *et al*. “Adolescents’ Perceptions of Sexual Health Education Programs: An Integrative Review,” *Journal of Adolescence*, vol. 84, no. 1, 2020, p. 96-112.

Council of Europe. “Human Rights Comment: Comprehensive Sexuality Education Protects Children and Helps Build a Safer, Inclusive Society,” 2020, https://www.coe.int/ca/web/commissioner/-/comprehensive-sexuality-education-protects-children-and-helps-build-a-safer-inclusive-society.

Cumming-Potvin, Wendy. “The Politics of School Dress Codes and Uniform Policies: Towards Gender Diversity and Gender Equity in Schools,” *International Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 122, 2023, p. 102239.

Davis, Glyn, and Kay Dickinson, editors. *Teen TV: Genre, Consumption and Identity*, British Film Institute, 2004.

Dawson, K., Nic Gabhainn, S., & MacNeela, P. “Porn Report: Survey Students on Pornography Use and Involving Them in Planning Critical Learning Interventions,” University of Galway, 2020 https://www.universityofgalway.ie/media/smartconsent/PornReport-PrintReady-A5.pdf.

Dobson, Amy S., and Jessica Ringrose. “Sext Education: Pedagogies of Sex, Gender and Shame in the Schoolyards of Tagged and Exposed,” *Sex Education*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2016, p. 8-21.

Dudek, Debra, Giselle Woodley, and Lelia Green. “‘Own Your Narrative’: Teenagers as Producers and Consumers of Porn in Netflix’s Sex Education,” *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2022, p. 502-515.

Edwards, Nichole. “Women’s Reflections on Formal Sex Education and the Advantage of Gaining Informal Sexual Knowledge through a Feminist Lens,” *Sex Education*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2016, p. 266-278.

Frost, Caroline. “Sex Education Creator Laurie Nunn on Transforming the Awkward Teenage Experience into a TV Masterpiece,” *Royal Television Society*, January 7, 2020, https://rts.org.uk/article/sex-education-creator-laurie-nunn-transforming-awkward-teenage-experience-tv-masterpiece.

Gaelic Athletic Association. “Official Guide,” Dublin, May 3, 2018, https://www.gaa.ie/api/pdfs/image/upload/xlasjshmfdcmfrynmvhz.pdf, Accessed 12 Jan. 2024.

Ghadery, Farnush. “#Metoo—Has the ‘Sisterhood’ Finally Become Global or Just Another Product of Neoliberal Feminism?” *Transnational Legal Theory*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2019, p. 252-74.

Goldfarb, Eva S., and Lisa D. Lieberman. “Three Decades of Research: The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education,” *Journal of Adolescent Health*, vol. 68, no. 1, 2021, p. 13-27.

Harrison, Emma. “French Family Planning Agency Turns to British TV Show Sex Education,” BBC online, 28 January 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66913308.

Herbenick, Debby, *et al*. “Changes in Penile-Vaginal Intercourse Frequency and Sexual Repertoire from 2009 to 2018: Findings from the National survey of sexual health and behavior,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, vol. 51, no. 3, 2022, p. 1419-1433.

Houghton, Daisy, and Frank Houghton. “Cause for Concern: Copycat Gender Identity Based Book Protests in Public Libraries in Ireland,” *Journal of Radical Librarianship*, 2023.

Hunter, James Davison. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, Basic Books, 1991.
Lawton, Megan, and Riyah Collins. "Sex Education Season 4: Creator Laurie Nunn Proud of Show's Impact," BBC, 2023. https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-66842528, Accessed 28 Jan. 2024.
Lim, Megan S. C., Elise R. Carrotte, and Margaret E. Hellard. "The Impact of Pornography on Gender-Based Violence, Sexual Health and Well-being: What do we Know?" *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, vol. 70, no. 1, 2016, p. 3-5.
Martinez, Gladys, *et al*. "Educating Teenagers about Sex in the United States. NCHS Data Brief. Number 44," NCHS Data Brief, 2010.
Martínez, Juliana, Ángela Duarte and María Juliana Rojas. "Manufacturing Moral Panic: Weaponizing Children to Undermine Gender Justice and Human Rights," The Elevate Children Funders Group & Global Philanthropy Project, 2021, https://static.showit.co/file/-npu74kWTNGv5xR20Oyqww/145396/manufacturing-moral-panic-report.pdf.
Meek, Michelle. *Consent Culture and Teen Films: Adolescent Sexuality in US Movies*, Indiana University Press, 2023.
Miedema, Esther, Le Mat, Marielle L J, and Frances Hague. "But is it Comprehensive? Unpacking the 'Comprehensive' in Comprehensive Sexuality Education," *Health Education Journal*, vol. 79, no. 7, 2020, p. 747-762.
Mulvey, Laura. *Afterimages: On Cinema, Women and Changing Times*, Reaktion Books, 2019.
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Primary and Post-primary Schools, 2019, https://ncca.ie/media/4462/report-on-the-review-of-relationships-and-sexuality-education-rse-in-primary-and-post-primary-school.pdf.
Neary, Aoife and Catherine Cross. "Exploring Gender Identity and Gender Norms in Primary Schools: The Perspectives of Educators and Parents of Transgender and Gender Variant Children," University of Limerick and the Transgender Equality Network of Ireland, 2018.
O'Connor, Rachel. "Like Something Out of a Porno Movie: Furious Catholics Call into Radio Show Discussing Normal People," *Irish Post*, May 1, 2020, https://www.irishpost.com/news/like-something-porno-movie-furious-catholics-call-radio-show-discussing-normal-people-184493.
"Parent Reviews to Sex Education," Common Sense Media, https://www.commonsensemedia.org/tv-reviews/sex-education/user-reviews/adult, Accessed 20 Dec. 2023.
Parkins, Brianna. "Andrew Tate is Filling Vacuum Left by Parents Who Don't Want to Have Awkward Talks with Their Sons about Women," *The Irish Times*, 9 Jan. 2024, https://www.irishtimes.com/life-style/people/2024/01/09/brianna-parkins-adults-see-andrew-tate-for-what-he-is-but-boys-are-at-risk-of-falling-victim-to-patriarchy-on-steroids/.
"Policies for Sex Education in the European Union: Note," https://healtheducationresources.unesco.org/library/documents/policies-sexuality-education-european-union-note.
Pound, Pandora, et al. "What is Best Practice in Sex and Relationship Education? A Synthesis of Evidence, Including Stakeholders' Views," *BMJ Open*, vol. 7, no. 5, 2017, p. 1-11.
Quadara, Antonia and Alissar El-Murr. "The Effects of Pornography on Children and Young People," Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2017, https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/online_pornography-effects_on_children_young_people_snapshot_0.pdf.
Rasmussen, Mary Lou. *Progressive Sexuality Education: The Conceits of Secularism*, Routledge, 2015.
Riebe, Emily. "The Feminine Gaze: The Re-imagination of Cinematic Female Sexual Experiences in a Post #MeToo World," *UWL Journal of Undergraduate Research* XXIII, 2020, p. 1-16. https://www.uwlax.edu/globalassets/offices-services/urc/jur-online/pdf/2020/riebe.emily.cst2020.pdf.
Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Primary and Post-Primary Irish Schools. A Research Paper. Seline Keating, Mark Morgan, Bernie Collins. Commissioned Paper, November 2018, https://ncca.ie/media/3782/relationships-and-sexuality-education-rse-in-primary-and-post-primary-irish-schools-a-research-paper.pdf.
Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education. Department of Education, Gov.uk, Updated 13 September 2021,

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/62cea352e90e071e789ea9bf/Relationships_Education_RSE_and_Health_Education.pdf, Accessed 30 Nov. 2023.

Rivas-Lara, S., Kotecha, H., Pham, B, and Uhls, Y.T. "Teens and Screens: What Teens are Actually Thinking About," Center for Scholars and Storytellers, UCLA, 2023, https://www.scholarsandstorytellers.com/reports/2023/11/23/teens-and-screens-what-teens-are-actually-thinking-about.

Rothman, Emily F., and Avanti Adhia. "Adolescent Pornography use and Dating Violence among a Sample of Primarily Black and Hispanic, Urban-Residing, Underage Youth," *Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2015, p. 1.

RTE News. "Normal People Ends on a High and Smashes RTÉ Player Record With 3.3 Million Streams," 3 June 2020. https://about.rte.ie/2020/06/03/normal-people-ends-on-a-high-and-smashes-rte-player-record-with-3-3-million-streams/, Accessed 28 Oct. 2020.

Ryder, Bridget. "WHO Challenged on Sex Education Guidelines," *The European Conservative*, 16 May 2023, https://europeanconservative.com/articles/news/who-challenged-on-sex-education-guidelines/.

Sex Education Legal Challenge Rejected in High Court, Local Government Lawyer, 13 December 2022, https://shorturl.at/suwOw.

Smith, Sarah H. "Scripting Sexual Desire: Cultural Scenarios of Teen Girls' Sexual Desire in Popular Films, 2000–2009," *Sexuality & Culture*, vol. 16, 2012, p. 321-341.

Statutory Guidance. Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) (Secondary), 2021. Department of Education. Gov.uk. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education/relationships-and-sex-education-rse-secondary.

Stępień, Aneta. "Understanding Male Shame," *Masculinities: A Journal of Identity and Culture*, no. 1, 2014, p. 7-27.

Stępień, Aneta & Máire Ní Mhórdha. "Consent and Adolescent Sexual Desire in Normal People and Sex Education," *Voices From the Wreckage: Young Adult Voices in the #MeToo Movement*, edited by Kimberly Karshner, 2023, p. 47-64.

Stewart, J. L., et al. "They See Sex as Something That's Reproductive and Not as Something People do for Fun": Shortcomings in Adolescent Girls' Sexual Socialization from Adults," *Journal of Adolescent Research*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2022, p. 250-279.

Strouse, Jeremiah, & Fabes, Richard A. "Formal versus Informal Sources of Sex Education: Competing Forces in the Sexual Socialization of Adolescents," *Adolescence*, vol. 20, no. 78, Summer 1985, p. 251-263.

Thacker, Alice. "The Reality of 'Normal People': an Analysis of How Reality Is Constructed in 'Normal People,' the Television Series," *Diggit*, 22 June 2020, www.diggitmagazine.com/blog/reality-normal-people-analysis-how-reality-constructed-normal-people-television-series, Accessed 3 Jan. 2024.

The Brussels Times. "Protestors come out in force in Brussels against compulsory sexual education," https://www.brusselstimes.com/681173/protestors-come-out-in-force-against-compulsory-sexual-education.

Screen Crush. "The 10 Most Sex-Positive Teen Series on Streaming," 26 March 2021. https://screencrush.com/sex-positive-teen-series-streaming-list/, Accessed 1 Sept. 2024.

Todd, Sarah. "Netflix's 'Sex Education' shows how learning to have good sex can make us better people," https://qz.com/quartzy/1547523/netflixs-sex-education-shows-how-learning-to-have-good-sex-can-make-us-better-people.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education. An Evidence-Informed Approach, Revised ed., UNESCO, 2018.

Waugh, Paul. "Rishi Sunak's Sex Education Rhetoric is Another US Culture War Import We Can Do Without," 2023, https://inews.co.uk/opinion/rishi-sunaks-sex-education-rhetoric-is-another-us-culture-war-import-we-can-do-without-2199424.

What Do Children and Young People Learn in Relationship, Sex and Health Education, The Education Hub. Blog Posted on: 10 March 2023, https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2023/03/10/what-do-children-and-young-people-learn-in-relationship-sex-and-health-education/.

WHO Regional Office for Europe. “Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe: A Framework for Policy Makers, Education and Health Authority,” 2010.

Máire Ní Mhórdha

Dr Máire Ní Mhórdha is a Lecturer in Critical Skills at Maynooth University, Ireland. She holds a PhD in Social Anthropology from the University of St Andrews. Her research interests include social movements, international development, gender, feminism, and reproductive rights. She co-authored “Of Trust and Mistrust: The Politics of Repeal” in *After Repeal. Rethinking Abortion Politics*, edited by Kath Browne and Sydney Calkin (2020).

Máire Ní Mhórdha est maîtresse de conférences en compétences critiques à l’Université de Maynooth, en Irlande. Elle est titulaire d’un doctorat en anthropologie sociale de l’Université de St Andrews. Ses recherches portent sur les mouvements sociaux, le développement international, le genre, le féminisme et les droits reproductifs. Elle est co-autrice de l’article “Of Trust and Mistrust: The Politics of Repeal” publié dans l’ouvrage *After Repeal. Rethinking Abortion Politics*, édité par Kath Browne et Sydney Calkin (2020).

Aneta Stępień

Dr Aneta Stępień is a Lecturer in Critical Skills at the University of Maynooth, Ireland. She received her PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Surrey (2014). She is the author of Shame*, Masculinity and Desire of Belonging. Reading Contemporary Male Authors* (2017), a comparative study of the literary and gendered expressions of shame. Her recent publications include “Polish Literary Reckoning of the Post-WWII Population Resettlement: The Lens of ‘Tender Narrator’,” in the *Review of European Studies* (vol. 14, 2022).

Aneta Stępień est maîtresse de conférences en compétences critiques à l’Université de Maynooth, en Irlande. Elle a obtenu son doctorat en littérature comparée à l’Université du Surrey (2014). Elle est l’autrice de *Shame, Masculinity and Desire of Belonging. Reading Contemporary Male Authors* (2017), une étude comparée des expressions littéraires et genrées de la honte. Parmi ses publications récentes, citons “Polish Literary Reckoning of the Post-WWII Population Resettlement: The Lens of ‘Tender Narrator’”, dans *Review of European Studies* (vol. 14, 2022).