PEER REVIEW HISTORY

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ARTICLE DETAILS

**TITLE (PROVISIONAL)**
What do young people think about their school-based sex and relationship education? A qualitative synthesis of young people’s views and experiences

**AUTHORS**
Pound, Pandora; Langford, Rebecca; Campbell, Rona

VERSION 1 - REVIEW

**REVIEWER**
Dr Julie Prescott
University of Bolton
UK

**REVIEW RETURNED**
16-Feb-2016

**GENERAL COMMENTS**
This is a really interesting article and well written. Just a few minor queries - what is the rationale for starting in 1990? The findings are purely qualitative studies rather than incorporating studies that used a mixed methods approach, where studies with a mixed methods approach discounted or was the qualitative element included in these findings? are the publications all peer reviewed?

**REVIEWER**
Dr Simon Forrest
School of Medicine, Pharmacy and Health
Durham University
United Kingdom

**REVIEW RETURNED**
19-Feb-2016

**GENERAL COMMENTS**
Many thanks for the opportunity to review this submission to BMJ Open. I am satisfied that the study is of relevance, timely and well conducted. The findings are the result of a careful and well-described analytic process and furthermore, plausible and coherent with the research on which the synthesis draws and wider thinking on the subject. There are however 4 respects in which I would invite the authors to consider make some adjustments to the submission:

1) The inclusion criteria mention studies referring to 4-19 year olds. The bulk of the included papers relate to SRE provided to and experienced by teenagers. What if any distinctive differences or issues emerge from the synthesis with regard to provision in the primary educational sector? In addition, the research seems not to reflect a great deal on the needs of children of with special educational needs, those who are/have been in care. You should consider commenting on this (even if it is to say that the source research does not address these groups).
2) In your introduction you make a strong case of the relevance of this study for the UK and in relation to current debates about policy on SRE in schools. Although the largest proportion of the studies relate to UK contexts something in the order of 20 come from the USA, elsewhere and Europe and in a couple cases elsewhere in the world. There are similarities between the issues being raised in the studies and also no doubt between the educational and socio-cultural and policy contexts in which these studies take place but there are also differences. Can you reflect on the significance of the convergence of issues in your analysis given these differences? What significance if any does ‘local’ policy, culture and socio-cultural have?

3) The temporality of the studies warrants comment. Whilst most of the studies referred to were undertaken in the 2000s one took place early in the 1990s. There have been significant changes in UK policy during this period. The Teenage Pregnancy Strategy in 1998, the DfE Guidance on SRE in 2000 and also in cultural norms (the equalisation of ages of consent, repeal of Section 28 and so on). Can you consider again the apparent continuity in the views and experiences of young people across the period? For example, is this because SRE has remained static, or always lags behind cultural change?

4) You refer several times to the ‘specialness’ of SRE as a topic within the school curriculum. This raises two issues. First, the ways that you identify SRE as special include not just its content and its relationship to matters of identity and personal experience, sexuality and so on, but also how it is delivered. This sense that there is something unconventional about SRE delivery warrants clarification. The teaching of many subjects is non-conventional if the assumption is that conventional means teacher-led ‘passive’ pedagogy. I think the issue here is primarily about the way that SRE relates to aspects of behaviour, identity and so on. I think that you could work through the issue about ‘specialness’ more carefully. Second, your paper essentially focuses on school-based SRE, perhaps this should be reflected more clearly in the title.

**REVIEWER**

Julia Bailey  
University College London, UK

**REVIEW RETURNED**  
19-Feb-2016

**GENERAL COMMENTS**

This is a timely and useful study - a qualitative synthesis of young people's views of sex and relationships education.

The paper is well written and results are presented logically and clearly.

Abstract:  
Participants: the age bands for eligible participants are confusing

Background:  
Some of the background context is very specific to England, and to policy events at this moment in time - I would omit this specific
detail, since the results are from papers world-wide, and the findings seem transferable to settings beyond England/UK.

Methods:
Please state whether studies from any country world-wide, and in any language

Bullet point strengths and limitations on page 2 seems odd. These should be in the discussion section I would think.

How many citations were screened in total? How many excluded and why? A flow chart would be useful.

Please can you define ‘first, second and third order constructs’ in the methods.

Findings
The findings are well described and have immediate relevance for the planning and teaching of school sex and relationships education.

The paper needs some clarifications, but is useful and original.

REVIEWER
Juping Yu
Research Fellow, University of South Wales, UK

REVIEW RETURNED
23-Feb-2016

GENERAL COMMENTS
This is an interesting article addressing an important topic area. The authors have provided some useful synthesised information about young people’s views on sex and relationship education. The paper has the potential to be published, with some revision required. Here are my comments in detail.

1. Page 3, second bullet point: “The study includes all eligible qualitative studies of young people’s views of their sex and relationship education from around the world for the period 1990 to 2015”.
   - Is this true? I suppose the authors included publications written in the English language, but not in any other languages. Please make this clear here and in the ‘eligibility’ session on page 5.

2. Introduction
   - A clear overview of what elements are covered in school SRE (statutory and not-statutory) should be provided. There is some information about SRE in England. How about SRE in the USA, considering lots of the studies reviewed were conducted in the States?
   - Be clear throughout of the paper when SRE means SRE provided in schools.
   - ‘Teenage pregnancy rates remains poor ….‘: What does this mean? Please rewrite.
   - ‘SRE and alcohol education’ is not mentioned until page 5. What is the focus of this paper? How sex and alcohol education is provided in schools? Are they provided side by side under SRE? Some additional information about this is needed.

3. Methods
   - When Table 3 and Table 4 are referred to in the text, the numbers
4. Synthesis
- The samples of included studies ranged between 4 and 25 years of age. This age range is wide. It is well known that sexual behaviour and attitudes to sexual behaviour differ according to a person’s age. Based on the studies reviewed, were views on SRE in schools different or similar among people of different ages? This information is not reported or discussed in the paper.
- Also, were there any findings regarding similar or different views of young people in different countries, as well as views of those in schools and those left schools?
- ‘Young people’, ‘young women’, ‘young men’, ‘girls’, and ‘students’ are used throughout the paper. Please check and be clear.
- Page 11: ‘Sex is a powerful subject’. What does this mean?
- There are some findings regarding sex, sexual activity, and young people being sexually active. It would be helpful if some clarifications are provided early in the introduction section. Also needs to be defined is sexuality.

5. Discussion
- There are some unclear words/terms which need to be clarified, including specialness of sex, youthful sexuality, sexualised behaviour, and desexualised.
- The discussion mainly focused on how SRE should be provided in schools and who should deliver it. Such discussion is useful; however, young people’s sexual behaviour and sexual health can be influenced by a wide range of social and cultural factors other than SRE in schools. This would need to be reflected in the discussion.

**VERSION 1 – AUTHOR RESPONSE**

**Reviewer 1**
1. Dr Prescott asked what the rationale was for starting our search in 1990. We have explained that because attitudes toward sexual health have changed significantly over the last few decades, we limited our search to studies conducted in or after 1990, envisaging that those conducted before 1990 would probably not be relevant today (1st para, p5).
2. Dr Prescott asked whether we discounted studies that used a mixed methods approach, or whether we included the qualitative element of such studies in our findings. We now note that if studies using mixed methods included a qualitative element that met our criteria, then this was included (1st para, p5).
3. Dr Prescott asked whether the publications are all peer-reviewed. We have clarified this by inserting ‘peer-reviewed’ before ‘journal articles’ (last para, p10).

**Reviewer 2**
1. Dr Forrest notes that the bulk of the included papers relate to teenagers’ experience of SRE and asks what differences or issues emerge with regard to provision for primary school children. We have now included a sentence giving more detail about the age of participants (pp10-11) and a sentence expanding on our findings from younger children, namely that these younger children seemed both less inhibited (in terms of engaging in the class) and more positive about their SRE delivery than older children (last para, p16). However, because we only found one study of younger children’s views (ages 6-12), this evidence is only suggestive and at this point is difficult to draw any solid conclusions about the significance of age. We have included a sentence to this effect in the Discussion (last para, p23). Additionally, he notes that we do not reflect on the needs of children with special educational needs or those who are, or have been, in care. We did note in the original version of the paper that
we excluded studies involving special schools or students with special educational needs (last para, p4). This was because we felt unable to do justice to the issues concerning these young people within the context of the current study.

2. Dr Forrest asks us to reflect upon why the studies came up with similar findings despite the differences in context (i.e. countries, policies, cultures etc.). To address this point – and point 3 below – we have included a new paragraph within the Discussion (pp19-20).

3. Dr Forrest asks us to reflect upon the apparent continuity in young people’s views and experiences across the period 1990 – 2015, given changes in UK policy and cultural norms. We have addressed this point within a new paragraph within the Discussion (pp19-20).

4. Dr Forrest asks us to work through the issue of ‘specialness’ of SRE as a topic. We think there is a misunderstanding here. In fact our point is about the ‘specialness’ of sex as a topic, not SRE, so we are arguing that there is something special about the content of SRE (not its delivery, as he suggests). We are simply arguing that sex is a topic that arouses strong emotions, reactions and feelings - of anxiety, embarrassment and vulnerability among others – and for this reason it cannot simply be discussed in the same way as other topics at school. Consequently we argue that the delivery of SRE needs to be given very careful consideration if students and teachers are not to find themselves in vulnerable positions. We have tried to clarify this in the 2nd para on p11.

5. Dr Forrest notes that since our paper essentially focuses on school-based SRE we should reflect this more clearly in the title. We have changed the title of the paper accordingly.

Reviewer 3

1. Dr Bailey suggests that in the abstract, the age bands for eligible participants are confusing. We have attempted to clarify this both in the abstract and the main text (1st para, p5).

2. Dr Bailey notes that our background context is very specific to England and suggests omitting this information since the papers come from all over the world. We acknowledge this point but are reluctant to omit the information since most of the papers do in fact originate from the UK. Instead, to give a slightly wider context we have included some brief information about sex education in the UK (as opposed to just England) and in the USA, as this is the country with next largest number of studies (1st para, p3). Unfortunately it would be difficult to give information on sex education in every country included in the synthesis without substantially lengthening the paper.

3. Dr Bailey asks us to state whether any studies worldwide, in any language, were eligible. They were, and we have clarified this (1st para, p5).

4. Dr Bailey suggest that the bullet points with strengths and limitations on p2 seem out of place. The BMJ Open’s ‘Instructions for Authors’ state that this section should be placed after the abstract, hence its position here. We do also discuss the strengths and limitations in the discussion.

5. Dr Bailey asks how many citations were screened in total and how many excluded, suggesting a flow chart. This information is given in a flow chart in Figure 1 which was included in our original submission, but which Dr Bailey may have missed. We have now added a pointer to the Figure where we describe our search process (last para, p5). (Previously we had only referred to it in the results section.)

6. Dr Bailey asks us to define ‘first, second and third order constructs’ in the methods. Again, Dr Bailey may have missed this, but we had already defined these terms in the methods section, under the headings ‘Data extraction’ and ‘Synthesis methodology’ (p7).

Reviewer 4

1. Dr Yu suggests that we included all publications written in English, but that we did not include publications written in other languages. Dr Bailey also raised this point and as noted above, we have clarified that studies from any country and in any language were eligible for inclusion in the synthesis (1st para, p5).

2. Dr Yu asks that a clear overview of what elements are covered in school SRE, both statutory and non-statutory, should be provided. We have clearly set out these elements as they relate to England (1st para, p3), but these elements vary within the UK, let alone elsewhere in the world. In the USA
elements vary according to state. We have added information to this effect (1st para, p3), as well as a little more information about the situation in the USA.

3. Dr Yu asks us to be clear throughout the paper that we are referring to SRE as it is provided in schools. Dr Forrest also mentioned this. As noted above we have changed the title of the paper to take account of this. We have also checked throughout the paper and clarified this where necessary.

4. Dr Yu asks us to clarify what we mean by ‘teenage pregnancy rates remain poor’. We have amended this to ‘teenage pregnancy rates remain high’ (2nd para, p3).

5. Dr Yu asks for additional information regarding the combination of ‘SRE and alcohol education’, stating that the combination of SRE with alcohol education is not mentioned until page 5. However in our introduction (2nd para, p4) we do state: ‘This study formed part of a multi-centre collaboration funded by the UK National Institute for Health Research (School for Public Health Research) to develop a sexual health and alcohol intervention for young people in schools.’ We did also originally state that we conducted a synthesis of qualitative studies of SRE and alcohol education. However, recognising that this is inaccurate (since we didn’t actually find any studies of SRE combined with alcohol education) we have deleted the ‘and alcohol education’ and attempt to clarify the situation regarding alcohol studies under ‘eligibility’ in the methods section (last para, p4). We have also deleted reference to alcohol studies in the Discussion.

6. Dr Yu notes that where Tables 3 and 4 are referred to in the text, the numbers don’t match the actual table numbers. We have corrected this mistake and thank Dr Yu for pointing it out.

7. Dr Yu suggests we discuss young people’s views in terms of age (given that there was a wide age range) and country (given that the studies come from several different countries). Dr Forrest also suggested addressing these points, and as noted above, we have done so within a new paragraph within the Discussion. Dr Yu also asks whether young people’s views differed according to whether they had left school or were still in school. They did not, and we have added a sentence to this effect within the same new paragraph.

8. Dr Yu observes that we use ‘young people’, ‘young women’, ‘young men’, ‘girls’ and ‘students’ throughout the paper. We believe that we use these terms appropriately and accurately. We only use the term ‘girls’ once and this is to refer to findings that come from female primary school aged pupils. We use ‘students’ simply for variety, as a substitute for ‘young people’.

9. Dr Yu asks us to explain what we mean by ‘Sex is a powerful subject’. We feel that we do explain this, both when we introduce the concept (2nd para, p11) and then much more fully in the Discussion (pp20-21). However, thinking about this has prompted us to replace ‘powerful’ with ‘potent’, which is more accurate and perhaps more comprehensible.

10. Dr Yu asks that we clarify our use of ‘sex’, ‘sexual activity’, ‘sexually active’ and ‘sexuality’. We believe that we have used these terms appropriately and accurately and that their use is clear and unambiguous given the contexts in which they are used. Perhaps ‘sexuality’ is the most potentially tricky term as it can mean both a capacity for sexual feelings/activity and a person’s sexual orientation. (We do not use ‘sexuality’ to mean sexual activity.) We have checked our use of the word ‘sexuality’ and feel that the meaning is clear throughout.

11. Dr Yu suggests that we need to clarify the terms ‘specialness of sex’, ‘youthful sexuality’, ‘sexualised behaviour’ and ‘desexualised’. When we addressed point 10 above, we amended ‘youthful sexuality’ to ‘young people’s sexuality’ as we felt this was clearer. In terms of ‘sexualised behaviour’ we mean behaviour that has a sexual quality or character. This term is only used once and we feel that its meaning is clear. Similarly, we only use the term ‘desexualised’ once, in the context of describing the teacher-student relationship. As such we mean that ideally the teacher-student relationship has no sexual quality to it. We think that this is clear from the context. The term ‘specialness of sex’ comes from Hawkes, whom we reference. The first time we use this term (2nd para, p11) we explain what we mean by it (and have amended this slightly to clarify): ‘Sex is a potent subject that arouses strong emotions, reactions and feelings - of anxiety, embarrassment and vulnerability among others - yet the prevailing approach within schools appears to be to deny that there is anything exceptional about the topic ….’. (2nd para, p11) Just to be clear, we have added ‘or distinctive nature’, after specialness.
12. Dr Yu makes the point that young people’s sexual health is influenced by a whole range of social and cultural factors apart from school-based SRE and asks that we acknowledge this. We have done so (1st para, p20) and thank Dr Yu for this comment.

VERSION 2 – REVIEW

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<th>Julie Prescott</th>
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GENERAL COMMENTS

I feel the authors have adequately addressed the previous comments from myself and the other reviewers.

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<td>School of Medicine, Pharmacy and Health</td>
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GENERAL COMMENTS

Many thanks for the opportunity to see a revised version of your paper. I appreciate the time and care that you taken to respond to the comments of all the reviewers. I am very happy with your responses to my comments and the consequent changes to the paper. I want to note in particular that I thought that the way you deal with the issue of the apparent continuity in young people’s views on SRE over time and despite considerable contextual change was elegant as well as thoughtful. I apologise for misunderstanding the issue about the ‘specialness’ of SRE as relating to its content. Reading the paper again I'd note that there is an interesting point for elaboration about sex being a ‘potent’ subject per se but also its relation to issues such as gender and especially heteronormativity. This is somewhat illustrated by the comment in table 5 from Teitelman et al (2009) and also that from Strange et al (2003) where the issue is how talk about sex plays into how gender power relationships are experienced and understood by young people. I am not recommending any further attention to this since I think readers can see the point from the data presented.

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<th>REVIEWER</th>
<th>Julia Bailey</th>
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GENERAL COMMENTS

This is now a very well written paper, with methods of analysis and synthesis clearly described, and results presented logically and clearly. It is a very useful piece of work which will be of interest to readers.

I would take out the claim that SRE leads to better opportunities for safeguarding, since this was not presented as a line of argument in the results.
GENERAL COMMENTS

I would like to thank the authors for revising the article, which reads better. I have a concern about the claim on page 6, line 16 "Studies from any country and any language were eligible for inclusion."

I understand that the authors did identify some relevant publications written in a non-English language via the database searches. What did the authors do with these publications? Were they included after translation or were they excluded due to the language or irrelevance? This information should be clearly presented in the text, as well as in Figure 1.

In addition, the databases that the authors searched are English based. I don’t think the claim above is appropriate, if they have not searched databases or journals in other languages.

VERSION 2 – AUTHOR RESPONSE

Reviewer 1 feels we have adequately addressed her concerns.

Reviewer 2 feels we have adequately addressed his concerns. We thank him for his very kind comments on our revisions.

Reviewer 3 suggests we ‘take out the claim that SRE leads to better opportunities for safeguarding, since this was not presented as a line of argument in the results’. What we write (last line of the paper) is that we need to get the delivery of SRE right otherwise young people will continue to disengage from SRE and opportunities for safeguarding young people will be reduced. This was not one of our findings (hence it was not presented in the results section, as the reviewer notes), but we consider it to be an implication of our findings, which is why it is placed in the discussion section of the paper. Therefore we would prefer to keep this sentence in if possible, as we feel it makes an important point.

Reviewer 4 has a concern about our claim in the section on ‘Eligibility’: ‘Studies from any country and any language were eligible for inclusion.’ (1st para, p5) She correctly notes that the databases we searched are in English and as such we agree that our claim is not strictly accurate. Therefore we have amended this sentence to: ‘Within the context of the databases searched, eligibility was not restricted by language or country.’

Reviewer 4 also asks us to clarify what we did with the non-English language papers, i.e. to state whether they were included after translation or excluded due to language / irrelevance. In the section on ‘Searches’ (2nd para, p5) we already note that 8 papers were translated before determining their inclusion/ exclusion. One of these papers was eventually included and we have now clarified this in the section on ‘Characteristics of studies and participants’ (2nd para, p10). Since we have already specified that we did not exclude studies due to language we feel that it is clear that the remaining 7 were excluded because they did not meet our eligibility criteria rather than because they were foreign language publications. We feel this clarifies the issue and do not think it appropriate to select these papers for further special consideration since they were treated in the same way as all the other papers.
We have also made an amendment to Appendix 4 (Features of the 55 papers synthesised) because when checking the translated paper (Fonseca et al 2010) we realised that although the language was Portuguese, its country of origin was Brazil, not Portugal. We have re-uploaded this PDF file with the amended version.
What do young people think about their school-based sex and relationship education? A qualitative synthesis of young people's views and experiences

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