

# Empowerment through sex education? Rethinking paradoxical policies

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## ABSTRACT

Youth empowerment is the main goal of sex education according to Dutch Government and NGO policies. Academics from different disciplines have argued, however, that the ideal of empowerment through education is problematic, because of the unequal power relations implicated in educational practices. Building on one-and-a-half years of online and offline ethnographic fieldwork among Dutch youth, this article argues that Dutch sex educational policies inhibit rather than encourage young people's empowerment by allowing only a limited number of sexual knowledge building practices to thrive while making others nearly impossible. In order to facilitate young people's empowerment, policies should aim to create space for young people to develop their own themes and priorities, to offer a multitude of perspectives, to set the pace and to use different strategies for sexual knowledge building, including learning by doing and online learning. This requires a cultural shift that involves both an openness to young people's experimentation, and a change in existing power hierarchies based on age.

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## Introduction

European sex education is evaluated as being of high quality (Beaumont and Maguire 2013) and the Netherlands especially is regarded a front runner (Lewis and Knijn 2002; Weaver, Smith, and Kippax 2005). Since 1993, schools are obliged to offer sex education on different topics, although schools may decide for themselves how much time they spend on this work, as well as which approach, methods and materials they use (Weaver, Smith, and Kippax 2005, 174). Dutch school-based sex education programmes are often described as one of the most comprehensive and liberal programmes in the world (Weaver, Smith, and Kippax 2005, 182). According to Lewis and Knijn (2002, 685),

... the Dutch approach to the subject [of teenage sexuality] has been to encourage self-reliance, respect for self and respect for others. The approach has been positive, emphasising sex as part of everyday life and something to be celebrated.

This positive, empowering approach is remarkable in comparison to other countries, including European countries such as the UK, where debates about sex education are sometimes

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dominated by more conservative moral views (Lewis and Knijn 2002). Indeed, the Dutch Government states that the central aim of sex education is to empower young people by providing them with sexual knowledge so that later they can ‘take their own responsibility’ for building ‘consensual, safe, and pleasurable sexual relations’ (Bussemaker 2009, 3, 7–8; Schippers 2011, 53).

Even though this ideal of empowerment through education sounds promising, it has been questioned by researchers from different fields, most notably that of critical pedagogy (e.g. Freire [1970] 2005; Ellsworth 1989; Gore 1990); a field that built on theoretical developments in other fields such as feminism, postcolonialism, queer theories, poststructuralism and postmodernism (Kincheloe 2008). Advocates of critical pedagogy critique education for reinforcing power hierarchies and hampering students’ empowerment. Researchers working on the politics of sexuality education (Allen 2005, 2011; Rofes 2005; Rasmussen 2006; Ringrose 2013) have also pointed out that this education is usually adult centred. In this paper, we will analyse how the paradoxical ideal of empowerment through education plays out in the case of Dutch sex educational policies, and to what extent these policies encourage or inhibit a process of sexual empowerment among youth through sexual knowledge building.

In order to do this, we take three steps. First, we broaden the scope of the discussion by using the concept of ‘sexual knowledge building’ instead of ‘sex education’ (White 2006). ‘Sexual knowledge’ is thereby understood in a broad sense: not just as ‘facts’, but as the entire ‘bank of information’ that an individual builds up about sexuality (White 2006, 13). Using the concept of sexual knowledge building instead of sex education is useful for broadening our understanding of sexual learning as a process that also takes place outside the context of teacher-led, school-based, formal education (see also Blake and Aggleton 2017; Byron and Hunt 2017). Moreover, the concept enables us to pinpoint what can make a learning process ‘empowering’, building especially on Rowlands (1997) operationalisation of empowerment. Second, we discuss the extent to which Dutch sex educational policies facilitate the empowerment of young people through sexual knowledge building. Inspired by recent theoretical and empirical investigations into the potential of the Internet (Harris 2003, 2005; Tsatsou 2012; Edwards et al. 2013; Szucs 2013; Byron and Hunt 2017), we will specifically explore young people’s use of online spaces. Third, we reflect on the question how educational policies can be improved in order to encourage more profoundly the sexual empowerment of youth.

## Empowerment through education?

According to Dutch government policies, sex education should prepare young people to take responsibility for their own sex lives. This means that the government sees sex education as a tool for empowerment; a concept that has been defined in different ways, but is always linked to people taking control over their lives (Rowlands 1997; Adams 2008; van Eerdewijk et al. 2017). Adams defines empowerment as:

the capacity of individuals, groups and/or communities to take control of their circumstances, exercise power and achieve their own goals, and the process by which, individually and collectively, they are able to help themselves and others to maximise the quality of their lives. (Adams 2008, xvi)

In this process, knowledge plays a crucial role (Rowlands 1997; van Eerdewijk et al. 2017).

One important strategy for enabling people to build knowledge is that of (formal) education. However, several scholars have pointed out that education alone does not necessarily contribute to empowerment. As Freire ([1970] 2005) argued in his landmark analysis of adult education in Brazil, education developed and provided by those in power usually functions to reinforce existing power hierarchies. Such education positions the teacher as the narrating subject, while pupils are imagined as listening objects. The task of the teacher in this 'banking concept' of education is to 'fill' the students with what (s)he considers to constitute 'true knowledge' (Freire, [1970] 2005, 72). According to Freire, the more effort students put into storing this knowledge, the less they develop a critical consciousness that would enable them to actively engage with the world. This contributes not to their empowerment, but to their oppression (Freire, [1970] 2005, 73–75). Freire's work made a major contribution to the strand of critical pedagogy, which was later intertwined with theoretical developments in the fields of feminism, postcolonialism, queer theories, poststructuralism and postmodernism (Kincheloe 2008).

Researchers focusing on the politics of sexuality education (Allen 2005; Rofes 2005; Rasmussen 2006; Allen 2011; Ringrose 2013) have brought hierarchies based on age to our attention, and criticised the educational system for being based on the goals set by adults. Major work in this area has been conducted by Allen (e.g. 2005, 2011) and Ringrose (e.g. 2013), who state that sex education is occupied mainly with the sexual health and control of the (young) population. As Ringrose (2013) points out, moralising panics over young people's sexual behaviours resonate with protectionist sex education policies that signal regulation rather than empowerment. Allen (2005, 2011) demonstrates how an adult-centred sex education system reinforces the unequal power balance between young people and adults. Instead of empowering young people, such education infantilises them by telling them 'what to do and think'. Analyses such as these demonstrate the difficulty of striving for empowerment through education.

In trying to find a 'solution' for this paradox, critical pedagogues have developed theories of how teachers can relate to students in more empowering ways. However, these theories often remain located within the framework of teachers empowering students; establishing teachers, not students, as the agents of empowerment (Gore 1990). Strategies based on such an approach, such as student empowerment and dialogue, 'give the illusion of equality while in fact leaving the authoritarian nature of the teacher/student relationship intact' (Ellsworth 1989, 306). Even researchers who are critical of this tendency often seek solutions within the context of the classroom. According to Ellsworth, for example, the biggest challenge for her as a teacher is to construct different classroom practices (1989, 323). Halpern (2013) argues that it is time for a fundamentally different understanding of where learning can take place. However, in defining new learning spaces, he still focuses on formal institutions. In a recent article, Byron and Hunt (2017) emphasise the importance of informal learning, and argue that this type of learning is best facilitated by supporting informal knowledge settings.

In order to think outside of the educational/institutional framework, it is helpful to consider Rowlands' analysis, which demonstrates that for an empowerment initiative to be effective, participants should be free to act from their own analysis (1997, 134): that they are facilitated to develop their own themes (1997, 63), set their own priorities (1997, 25), work at their own pace (1997, 93) and tackle issues in their own ways (1997, 97). Because of this, organisations working on empowerment should be prepared to accept changes in existing

power hierarchies (1997, 141). Rowlands warns that facilitating people to determine their own agenda does not mean an unquestioning acceptance of their ideas. On the contrary: challenging assumptions forms an intrinsic part of the process of empowerment (1997, 134).

Also helpful for thinking outside of the educational/institutional framework is White's analysis of learning about sexuality as a process of 'sexual knowledge building' rather than 'sexual education' (2006). According to White, sexual knowledge building is the continuous, complex process during which previous knowledge, experiences and beliefs are used to construct meaning out of new pieces of information gathered in different ways from different sources. Such an approach is comparable to the 'jigsaw puzzle' metaphor that has been introduced to describe sexual knowledge (Jackson 1978; Thomson and Scott 1991), but by emphasising the continuous process of meaning making, White's approach is more dynamic: in the process of fitting in new pieces of information, both the existing puzzle and the new pieces will unavoidably undergo change. What is most important to the present article, however, is that all these analyses point to ways of learning and sources of knowledge that are often neglected in critical pedagogy, such as overhearing family members engaging in sexual intercourse (White 2006, 56). Sexual knowledge building thus consists of a broad range of experiences, which may also take place outside formal institutions (see also Jackson 1978; Thomson and Scott 1991; Blake and Aggleton 2017; Byron and Hunt 2017).

In this paper, we subscribe to the idea that knowledge, understood in a broad sense as described earlier, can play an important role in people's empowerment process, so long as the 'target group' is enabled to develop and follow their own agenda. Therefore, we analyse the extent to which educational policies facilitate young people in setting the agenda for sexual knowledge building. In order to place young people at the heart of our analysis, we move away from the (formal, adult centred) concept of 'education' to the broader concept of 'sexual knowledge building', which includes *all* activities that contribute to learning about sexuality. Studying educational policies from this perspective enables us to critically assess the assumptions behind sex educational policies about 'good knowledge' and 'acceptable' ways of learning about sexuality.

Specific attention will be paid to the role of the Internet and social media in young people's knowledge building practices, since these have transformed the mechanisms by which knowledge is produced and circulated (Edwards et al. 2013, 1). Edwards and colleagues argue that even though Internet technologies can create 'filter bubbles' (Pariser 2011), they also offer opportunities to develop and share counter-expertise, and to challenge expert knowledge organisations. Several researchers have discussed how these transformations influence the production and sharing of knowledge about sexuality (Tsatsou 2012). In her overview, Tsatou concludes that on the one hand, online services and content recycle 'patriarchal and identity-rigid sexualities', while on the other hand they also provide access to 'alternative or non-mainstream sexualities'. This double role is confirmed in case studies conducted among youth (Harris 2003, 2005; Szucs 2013; Byron and Hunt 2017), demonstrating the importance of contextualised studies, which is what we aim to do.

## Methodology

For this study, the first author conducted one-and-a-half years (2013–2014) of ethnographic fieldwork among Dutch young people aged 12–18 and carried out a policy document analysis (2015–2016). The ethnographic fieldwork was guided by the question how young people

perform sexuality, especially in relation to the increasing popularity of the social media. Participation, observation and conversation were combined to allow for a 'thick description' (Geertz 1973).

In the first year, online and offline participant observation was conducted. Offline participant observation took place in eight different schools, on public transport and at national meetings of young people participating in Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs). Most participant observation was conducted in two schools in a medium-sized city in the East of the Netherlands offering all levels of education. Alongside participant observation, 29 interviews and 7 focus group meetings<sup>1</sup> were conducted. Most of the interviewees were pupils of the schools where participant observation had been conducted; others were recruited via personal networks because of their specific backgrounds and/or experiences. This approach resulted in the participation of young people who were diverse with regard to gender, age, educational level, ethnic background, sexual identification and experiences and religion. For the online participant observation, we generally followed the research participants who were also involved in our offline research, which helped us to better understand their online activities and to gain access to private accounts.

After one year of fieldwork, a survey was constructed to analyse how common some of the observed activities and patterns were. Moreover, the open questions allowed participants to mention experiences which they considered taboo or hard to talk about in face-to-face conversations. The survey was completed by 679 Dutch young people.<sup>2</sup> About half of the survey participants were pupils at a large school offering pre-vocational and academic secondary education in a small town in the East of the Netherlands. These pupils were diverse with regard to age, gender and educational level. Unfortunately, with regard to ethnicity there was little diversity as almost all pupils described their ethnic background as being 'Dutch'. We tried to recruit additional schools which were more ethnically diverse, but did not succeed, both because of practical reasons (e.g. busy school schedules and approaching summer holidays) and to the topic of the survey (see also Leurs 2012). Diversity in terms of sexual preferences, practices and identifications was also not very extensive, with heterosexuality being dominant. We were able to correct this by recruiting the other half of the participants via an online community for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) youth. Thus, the survey reports on a wealth of experiences, but the quantitative analyses are not representative and should be regarded as indicative. In this article, all research participants have been made anonymous.

Finally, we conducted a policy document analysis to understand how the process of sexual knowledge building is conceptualised by policy-makers in the Netherlands, and what are considered to be 'good' knowledge and 'acceptable' ways of learning about sexuality. This is based on the idea that policies simultaneously reflect and reproduce dominant cultural ideas and practices related to sexual knowledge building. In other words, they are not only indicators of how a society conceptualises young people's process of sexual knowledge building, but also actively contribute to the construction of these conceptualisations, thereby building a framework wherein only certain knowledge building practices can thrive.<sup>3</sup>

In particular, we analysed two policy letters from the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, which is the portfolio holder responsible for sex education. These are the most recent policy documents that explicitly discuss sex education for young people. The first is a 24-page policy letter about sexual health written by (former) State Secretary Jet Bussemaker (2009). In this document, sex education is one of the central themes. The other document

is the 82-page Bill titled ‘Health Nearby’ (*Gezondheid dichtbij*) (Schippers 2011), published by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport led by Minister Edith Schippers. The paragraph concerning the sexual health of young people (Schippers 2011, 53–4) confirms that Bussemaker’s letter is still used as a guideline.

In addition to governmental policies, we also analysed policies of the NGOs that are subsidised by the Ministry to translate governmental policies into educational materials, most notably *Rutgers WPF* and *Soa Aids Nederland*, who have developed the educational kit that is most used in secondary schools: ‘Long live love’ (*Lang leve de liefde*) (Soa Aids Nederland 2014). We also analysed Rutgers WPF’s 32-page ‘Guideline for sexuality education’ (van der Vlugt 2013), which is an edited translation of the European guidelines, as well as websites about sex education hosted by the two organisations.

## The politics of Dutch sex education

In her policy letter, Jet Bussemaker states that she aims to:

improve sexual health of the population [...] by facilitating the provision of *enough* factual knowledge to all Dutch citizens during the years they grow up [...] so that they have a *sufficient* basis for safe and consensual sex that they can enjoy [emphasis added]. (2009, 2)

By using words like ‘enough’ and ‘sufficient’ knowledge, Bussemaker implies that a certain basic set of knowledge exists that can be provided to all Dutch citizens in order to prepare them for sexual experiences. In the Dutch version of the *Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe* (Winkelmann 2010; see also European Expert Group on Sexuality Education 2016), Rutgers WPF describes learning about sexuality as a more continuous process, but still claims that it results in the development of ‘adequate knowledge’ (van der Vlugt 2013, 5), suggesting the existence of a certain quantity and quality of knowledge that is ‘sufficient’.

This concept of ‘sufficient’, ‘basic’ or ‘adequate’ knowledge is not only applied to the cognitive domain of learning (Bloom et al. 1956). It returns in relation to a second domain of learning: the affective domain (Bloom et al. 1956) also known as ‘attitudes’, ‘values’ and/or ‘norms’. In advising teachers about sex education, Rutgers WPF and Soa Aids Nederland argue that, ‘Sexual and relational education in the school [...] makes [young people] develop *adequate* values and norms’ [emphasis added].<sup>4</sup> Also Bussemaker refers to certain ‘basic values’ (autonomy, setting boundaries, reciprocity and respect) that should be transferred to young people (2009, 7). Thus, ‘basic’ sexual knowledge entails not only ‘enough’ cognitive knowledge, but also certain ‘adequate’ attitudes.

A third domain of learning, next to the cognitive and affective domain, is the psychomotor or ‘skills’ domain (Bloom et al. 1956). This domain receives less attention in educational policies. Rutgers WPF and Soa Aids Nederland acknowledge the importance of this domain, but add, ‘it is also difficult because children cannot practice sexual behaviour in a group or in class’. Still, they do argue that certain skills should be included in sex education, such as talking about wishes and boundaries and using contraception (van der Vlugt 2013, 14). Thus, for all three domains of learning, albeit with slightly less attention for skills, sex educational policies imply that education should be aimed at the transference of a standardised, basic set of ‘adequate’ knowledge, skills and attitudes.

This ‘sexual foundation’ should be acquired *before* people become sexually active, says Bussemaker: ‘Each year, about 200.000 children become sexually active. It is important that they receive sexual education *before* they start having sex’ [emphasis added] (2009, 7). A

2014 government campaign about sexuality uses a similar argument and encourages parents to 'discuss porn with your child, *before* the Internet does it' [emphasis added]. Also Soa Aids Nederland and Rutgers WPF advocate the following specific order: 'Many pupils lack the right knowledge and skills to make healthy sexual choices. Some have not been prepared enough for their first sexual contact.'<sup>5</sup> This demonstrates how in educational policies, learning about sex is separated from sexual experiences. Furthermore, the two are placed in an ideal order: theoretical learning first, followed by practical experience.

Policies about sex education locate 'good knowledge' primarily in specific spaces and persons, namely in the school and the home: in school teachers and parents. According to Bussemaker, '[i]t is logical that parents take care of enough and timely sexual education for their child; they are the primary caregivers'. However, not all parents succeed, she claims, and '[t]hose children will have to get their information elsewhere. In school, for example. Schools also have a task with regard to sexual education. Those who don't get enough information at home can partially make that up at school' (2009, 8). The Ministry specifically mentions parents and school teachers when discussing the use of educational materials on their website, stating that these 'play an important role in the sexual upbringing of children.'<sup>6</sup> Also Rutgers WPF and Soa Aids Nederland call on parents and school teachers to discuss sexuality with children. This emphasis on parents and schools is consistent with international tendencies (e.g. Robinson, Smith, and Davies 2017).

Although young people are excluded as sources of knowledge in educational policies, they are not completely absent in sex education. Experiences and opinions of young people are sometimes included in educational materials. At the same time, however, they are seriously distrusted. For example, Rutgers WPF and Soa Aids Nederland tell parents: 'Friends are important to young people. Click here to read more about peer pressure.'<sup>7</sup> Even though at first this statement seems to acknowledge the role of peers, it later dismisses them as suitable sources of knowledge by associating them with (negative) peer pressure, against which a young person must be defended by adults. Apparently, young people are only seen as valuable sources of knowledge when their contributions have been collected, edited and disseminated by adults (see also Allen 2011, 6).

In addition, the Internet and social media are met with suspicion:

Now that social media are becoming more popular, children and young people can access information about sexuality en masse. The images and information [...] are often distorted, unbalanced and disrespectful. Sexual and relational education can contradict, correct and nuance this information. (van der Vlugt 2013)

This statement made by Rutgers WPF represents the social media as places where mostly 'wrong' information is to be found, which must be 'corrected' by sex educators. Also the governmental campaign mentioned above ('Discuss porn with your child, before the Internet does it') is based on the assumption that 'the Internet' will probably give young people 'wrong' information about porn.

At the same time, the Internet and social media are used by the government and educational organisations as an educational tool. Several websites have been developed with information for youth, parents, school teachers and other professionals,<sup>8</sup> and educational organisations have accounts on social media like Twitter and Facebook. The explanation for this can be found in Bussemaker's policy letter: 'I find it important that there is mostly good information available [on the Internet]. Therefore, I had professionals develop a website that contains information about love, relationships, contraception, safe sex, etcetera' (2009, 10).

Apparently, only information shared by educational organisations is considered ‘good information’.

This ideal of sex education as a standardised process in which certain adults provide young people with a certain type and amount of knowledge at a certain moment in time and in certain ways contradicts the ideal of empowerment. It does not allow young people to develop their own themes and priorities, work at their own pace, and develop their own strategies for building sexual knowledge. In the following paragraphs, we will discuss how this hinders certain practices of sexual knowledge building that are important to young people.

## Developing themes and priorities

By assuming that all young people can benefit from one standardised package of knowledge, educational policies deny the vast diversity among youth with regard to the themes and perspectives that are important to them. Through our survey, interviews and observations, we encountered a variety of topics that research participants were interested in, ranging from the meaning of difficult or abstract words like ‘orgasm’ and ‘love’ to the functioning of body parts such as genitals and the clitoris; from issues such as gender and sexual identity to urban myths; from virginity and ‘the first time’ to sexual norms such as the heterosexual ideal; from suggestions on how to do certain sexual activities to ‘safe sex’, contraception and STDs; from pregnancy, childbirth and parenthood to sexual violence; and from suggestions with regard to love, romance and relationships to suggestions on how to communicate with (specific) others such as parents about these topics. This diversity poses a challenge to the narrow and standardised idea of ‘basic’ sexual knowledge that characterises much sex educational policy. Moreover, it makes clear that a limited set of formal sex education classes can never be sufficient to cover all topics that young people are interested in.

To further complicate this, the *type* of knowledge that young people look for also varies. Sometimes, young people search for knowledge that is perceived as ‘objective’, such as definitions, descriptions and statistics. However, equally important is knowledge that is considered to be ‘subjective’, such as other people’s experiences, feelings and opinions.

Two types of ‘subjective’ knowledge came up during our research. The first was brought up by Lea (15) during a focus group meeting. Lea had talked with her mother about the age of having intercourse for the first time, but had also visited an online forum: ‘I want to wait [with having sex] very long, and I wanted to know whether other people find that . . . normal’. On the forum, we observed a boy (14) asking his peers: ‘Hey, I’m 14 years old and I’m worried because I talked very much about sex with a girl on MSN, really very much, and she made me come with all the horny things she said. Is this normal!?’ For youth belonging to some kind of minority, hearing other people’s opinions about their ‘normalcy’ was important subjective knowledge: ‘[I looked up information about] fetishes and so on, whether it’s normal or not normal’ (boy, 18, in survey). For many research participants, being ‘normal’ was an important goal, and therefore knowledge about what others consider as ‘normal’ is valuable information.

A second type of ‘subjective knowledge’ that research participants regarded as important was experiential knowledge (see also Byron and Hunt 2017). For example, Cindy (15), who had been sexually harassed by her uncle via WhatsApp, remembered to save all these conversations, because she had read a similar story in a magazine. The personal character of the



story in particular had caused it to make a big impression on her, so that she remembered it and could use the information to deal with her own difficult situation.

Experiential knowledge is not just valued for the practical information it contains, however. It is also valued as a source of support, explained Lana (16) in an interview. While by the time of the interview she identified as a 'proud lesbian', this had not always been the case, and she had had an extremely difficult time accepting her attraction to girls. She used the social media, mainly YouTube, Tumblr and Youngandout (in Dutch: *Jongenout*), to find people who 'had the same feelings'. Lana felt that because these experiential experts (those who based their expertise on personal experiences) had been through similar experiences, they understood her better than others, which enabled her to discuss the issues that she was struggling with. This resulted not only in acknowledgement and recognition of her feelings, but also in adequate advice and support.

Moreover, experiential experts functioned as role models for Lana: 'Being yourself, that's what I learned from them, not necessarily through talking with them, but also through watching their videos [...]. I thought: I want that too!' By explicitly and implicitly embracing their same-sex preferences, experiences and/or identities, experiential experts became role models for Lana.

Additionally, experiential experts helped Lana to confirm the 'normalcy' of her sexual preferences, which shows that experiential knowledge may overlap with the first type of 'subjective' knowledge, about what is considered to be 'normal'. Lana had severe doubts about her being 'normal', because: 'Nobody in my environment was homosexual, so I didn't know whether I was normal'. Additionally in school, homosexuality was hardly discussed (see also Meerhoff 2016). Finding people with similar experiences helped Lana to confirm that she was; that there were more people 'like her'. Moreover, these people came across as 'nice, funny people' with a 'good life', which helped Lana to confirm that identifying as a lesbian would not mean that she would have to identify as an 'abnormal' person. Thus, experiential knowledge is valuable for young people in transferring practical skills and information, providing support and inspiration, and confirming the 'normalcy' of experiences and feelings.

The themes and types of knowledge discussed here may be offered through formal education, but their variety makes it nearly impossible for schools to cover them all in a way that is satisfactory to all students. Moreover, young people do not always consider their school teachers to be the most suitable sources of knowledge, or their schools the best contexts to build sexual knowledge, as will become clear in the following sections.

## Finding different perspectives

Adding an extra layer to Rowlands' operationalisation, our research also points at the importance of the perspectives that are allowed to play a role in sexual knowledge building. Finding people who are able and willing to confirm the 'normalcy' of certain feelings, experiences and identifications requires the availability of a multitude of perspectives; a requirement that is absent from Dutch sex educational policies.

One perspective that played a central role for research participants while being completely absent in sex educational policies is the perspective of young people themselves. Even though participants often regarded adults as appreciated sources of information, they also indicated that adults such as school teachers or parents were not always the most suitable

persons to turn to, for reasons ranging from feelings of embarrassment to a striving for privacy and autonomy, and from a fear of being condemned or punished to scepticism towards adult knowledge and norms.

More often than not, peers played an important role in research participants' process of knowledge building, both in formal and in informal contexts (see also Forrest, Strange, and Oakley 2002, 2004; Kidger 2004; White 2006; Allen 2011; Szucs 2013; Byron and Hunt 2017). During participant observations we noticed many instances of (informal) sexual knowledge building among peers through casual or more profound conversations, remarks, gazes and jokes; showing that 'peer education' is much more complex and interwoven with daily practices than is generally assumed in dominant, 'technicist' approaches of peer education (see also Southgate and Aggleton 2017).

In general, peers are highly appreciated as sources of knowledge. In the survey, respondents ( $n = 347$ ) were asked whether they searched for information from adults, peers or both the last time they looked up information online. Only 9% of these respondents were looking for information from adults, 38% of them were looking for information from both adults and peers and 53% of the respondents were looking for information from peers. In particular, two sorts of information, namely suggestions for (communication about) sexual/romantic activities, and information about other people's experiences/feelings/opinions, were associated with peers.

In addition to being able to provide specific types of information, Kyra and her boyfriend Mark (17) also pointed out another advantage of information coming from peers:

Mark: Peers are the people you hang out with; you don't hang out with your gp.

Kyra: [...] Young people [...] are like yourself.

According to Kyra and Mark, peers felt 'closer', more 'alike' and were therefore a more suitable source of information than adults. Such a view was confirmed by a participant of a Gay Straight Alliance meeting, who said about discussing sexuality: 'A teacher is more distant [than a peer]. He or she grew up in a different period and does not know what it is like for you at this specific moment'. This links up with research among adults, which shows that people who feel 'close' often play a crucial role in the process of looking up and engaging with information about topics such as the Internet/computer (Bakardjieva 2005) and health (Wyatt et al. 2005).

Bakardjieva (2005, 99) calls these people 'warm experts' or 'an expert [...] in the professional sense or simply in a relative sense compared with the less knowledgeable other', who is 'immediately accessible in the user's lifeworld as a fellowman/woman' and who mediates between universals and the concrete situation of the novice. Warm experts help others to understand the relevance of certain information for their own situations (Wyatt et al. 2005, 211–212). For young people, peers are in the ultimate position to function as warm experts, since they feel close, are immediately accessible, and often possess the knowledge and skills that are perceived as necessary at that moment.

Sometimes, young people specifically look for peers with a similar background or similar experiences, like Lana's story made clear. In other cases, young people want to discuss sexuality with peers whom they consider to be different. Esra (15), a girl identifying as Muslim, liked reading about other girls' experiences and opinions on the online forum *GirlsScene.nl*. She preferred reading the opinions of non-Muslim girls, because 'most Muslim girls are too strict, and I am not so strict'. According to Esra, most Muslim girls would label her as 'easy';

because she had been in several romantic relationships and liked hanging out with boys. She believed non-religious girls were more open-minded and therefore preferred to build knowledge together with non-religious peers, although the aim of looking for 'different' peers is that she expects them to have similar ideas and values.

To some extent, formal contexts such as schools may be suitable to share such 'peer knowledge'. Our study confirms earlier findings in both theoretical and empirical research that describe peer education as 'successful' in different respects (Harden, Weston, and Oakley 1999; Turner and Shepherd 1999; Mellanby, Rees, and Tripp 2000; Kim and Free 2008). At the same time, we also observed that formal peer education was often developed, organised and controlled by adult professionals (see also Strange, Forrest, and Oakley 2002). Our research suggests however that even if form and content were to be controlled by peer educators, formal contexts may not always be the best contexts to learn from peers. This is related to the pace at which young people build sexual knowledge and to the strategies they use. We elaborate on this below.

### **Setting the pace**

In sex educational policies, the moment at which certain knowledge should be 'learned' is highly standardised. This conflicts with young people's diverse needs and practices with regard to the pace in which they build sexual knowledge. The amount of interest in sexuality and sexual knowledge building among research participants ranged from 'not interested at all' to being 'extremely curious' (see also Dalenberg 2016). This difference was not necessarily linked to gender and/or age, as is often assumed. For example, while some 14-year-old research participants indicated not being interested in sex at all, others had already had their first sexual experiences. For the first group, sexual knowledge building was not a relevant issue, leading them to ignore information that crossed their path. For the second group however, sexual knowledge was often (though not always) a valuable good.

The amount of interest in sexuality and sexual knowledge building is not only diverse, but also highly dynamic. For example, when we asked survey participants whether they would like to have more information or education about sexuality, several responded with remarks such as 'maybe in the future', and 'not at this moment in time', indicating that they expected their needs to change. Such a change does not necessarily involve a unidirectional change from less to more interest in sexuality: while at one point in time a young person may be very interested in learning about sexuality, this may change more or less quickly due to new circumstances, experiences or feelings. Young people look for different bits of information at different points in time (see also White 2006). This makes the standardised time schedule in sex educational policies highly problematic.

### **Using different strategies**

The reliance of educational policies on a standardised model of knowledge building, which is especially aimed at formal, school-based teaching, hinders young people in developing 'other' strategies. One of those strategies is learning by doing. Several research participants contradicted the idea behind sex education that theory comes before practice; in their case, they had learned through practical experience. This is in line with arguments put forward

by the progressive education movement, which started in the late nineteenth century and objected to the separation of theory and practice (e.g. Dewey [1899] 1963, [1938] 1972).

For some young people, following the strategy of learning by doing was born from necessity. For others it was a deliberate choice. One of them was Femke (18), who found that (too much) theoretical knowledge hinders sexual pleasure: 'It is less exciting if you already know how it works.' Young people like Femke learn through experience and evaluate that as exciting. Even though they may appreciate some information and discussion, they also want to have the opportunity to 'figure things out' themselves and discover their preferences through practical experience.

A second strategy for building sexual knowledge that is severely mistrusted in policies while it is of major importance to young people, is the use of the Internet and social media. In our survey, 58% of the respondents ( $n = 603$ ) indicated using the Internet/social media more or less often to find information about love, relationships and sexuality. Of these respondents ( $n = 347$ ), 89% judged the information they found during their latest search 'useful' (49%) or 'somewhat useful' (40%). This is not to say that research participants *only* encountered useful information. On the contrary, several research participants expressed mixed feelings about online information: 'On the one hand the Internet is useful, on the other hand it isn't. Because half of what can be found online is nonsense' (Jelle, 13). Nevertheless, most research participants agreed that there was also a large amount of very useful information to be found online.

The information young people find online is very diverse. It includes information offered by experts and laypersons, adults and peers and it may be found in formal or informal online contexts. The information also includes so called 'sexually explicit material' such as porn. Even though such materials are often condemned in dominant discourse, young people also describe them as instructive: 'You can learn about tricks and positions, which you may want to try out in your relationship' (Frank, 17). This is not to say that young people uncritically copy the activities they see online. Several research participants were very critical about the content of (mainstream) porn. Moreover, Femke (18) explains:

It's true that it often portrays women in subordinate positions. But I don't find that a negative thing, because I know that I don't think about it [gender relations] that way. [...] In fact, I am usually the dominant person. [in my relationships]

Femke's explanation shows that even when young people feel inspired by sexually explicit materials, this does not mean they are uncritical about the activity or its underlying assumptions.

Using the Internet and social media to build sexual knowledge has several advantages for young people. The first of these is that online, a vast amount of information from a multitude of perspectives is available. This information remains available over a more or less extended period of time, enabling young people to find content at their own pace, and to engage with content multiple times if that is needed.

Secondly, content and sources may be discovered that are not easily found offline, such as experiences, feelings and opinions of (specific) other people: 'via Tumblr, you can get into contact with people whom you would never meet offline' (Hanneke, 16). This was especially mentioned by young people from minority groups, such as LGBT or strongly religious youth.

A third advantage of the Internet and social media is that they afford building knowledge without having to ask other people for help. This is especially appreciated when questions are considered 'embarrassing', says Jim (14): 'Some things I can discuss with my parents, but

others I'd rather keep to myself. Those are the ones I look up on the Internet'. What exactly constitutes an 'embarrassing' topic differed widely among research participants.

A fourth advantage of the Internet and social media is the opportunity to remain (partly) anonymous. Kyra (15) described a visit to her General Practitioner (GP), together with her mother:

I was at the GP for my eyes, and we also asked about the [contraceptive] pill. But it was so awkward, because there was also an assistant. They asked: why do you want the pill? And I mentioned the advantages: less acne, less heavy periods. Then she asked: not for preventing pregnancy? And my mother was sitting next to me and I was like: don't ask that question! Shut up!

Offline, Kyra felt embarrassed discussing contraception with not only her GP, but also an assistant and her mother. She felt much better when chatting with a professional via text messages on Sense.info. The difference between the two conversations was not just about anonymity, but also about (lack of) face-to-face contact, said Kyra's boyfriend Mark (17): 'You don't see each other, you don't hear each other, you can be completely yourself'. This feeling was shared widely among research participants: 71% of all survey respondents indicated that they dared saying (or typing) more via social media.

Most research participants were involved not only in taking knowledge from websites and social media, but also in developing and spreading knowledge about sexuality. Sometimes this was hegemonic knowledge, such as heteronormative and sexist jokes. But also 'alternative' knowledge was developed and shared. For example, several young people identifying as LGBT put great effort into sharing and mainstreaming knowledge about sexual diversity. This involvement in improving existing knowledge contradicts the depiction of the Internet and social media in educational policies as 'unsuitable' places containing 'bad' knowledge.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have discussed how the 'empowerment through education' paradox plays out in Dutch sex educational policies. We demonstrated how educational policies allow only certain types of knowledge building to flourish, while inhibiting others, thereby hindering young people's sexual empowerment in terms of developing themes and priorities, finding different perspectives, setting the pace, and using different strategies for sexual knowledge building. Even though the Dutch system is highly regarded, our analysis shows that there is still considerable room for improvement. Young people's sexual empowerment would benefit from educational policies that are more sensitive to young people's own needs and strategies.

This is not a suggestion to abolish formal sex education. On the contrary: for many young people, formal education is an important part of their knowledge building process. Moreover, formal education can be crucial for critically interrogating young people's ideas and practices; an essential element of empowerment. At the same time, we must be careful not to define adults as subjects of this interrogation and youth as the objects. Our research has shown that the tables might be turned sometimes, with young people critically interrogating adult knowledge.

We do argue that formal, adult centred sex education is only one aspect of young people's process of sexual knowledge building. Therefore, policies that are aimed at empowering young people should include by definition the support of young people's own ways of knowledge building, formal and informal, offline and online. The Internet and social media

offer specific opportunities for building knowledge about a diversity of topics, from different perspectives, at different paces, anonymously and autonomously. Supporting young people's online activities entails more than providing them with 'good knowledge' stemming from certain adult experts; it also means facilitating young people's participation in a diverse range of networks and activities.

Empowering youth through sexual knowledge building therefore requires a cultural shift which involves both an openness to young people's experimentation, and a change in existing, age-based power hierarchies. Moreover, it is important for young people to have 'spaces of their own' for sexual knowledge building. As we have shown, the absence of the adult gaze can be crucial for certain online and offline practices of sexual knowledge building, such as anonymous learning, learning through practical experience, and to some extent learning from peers. These conclusions are relevant not only to our case study of the Netherlands, but also to policy makers, politicians, researchers, professionals and activists in other countries who are interested in young people's sexual empowerment, sex education and sexual knowledge building.

## Notes

1. Three focus group meetings were conducted by the first author together with a number of Masters students, who used the data as part of their MA theses. Two of these meetings were chaired by MA students: one by Queeny Eugenia and one by Marjoke Tiems. In these meetings, the first author was present only as an observer. The third meeting was chaired by the first author, together with two other Masters students – Nathalie Platter and Barbara Magnée. All other focus group meetings were conducted and chaired by the first author.
2. The survey was conducted by the first author with the help of two Master's students: Nathalie Platter and Barbara Magnée.
3. Even though policies are not the only factor influencing sexual knowledge building. For example, in the context of school-based sex education, Schutte et al. (2014) have demonstrated that the implementation of educational programmes depends on several factors, including teachers' curriculum-related beliefs.
4. See <https://www.seksuelevorming.nl/onderwijssoort/voortgezet-onderwijs/starten-met-seksuele-vorming> Accessed 14 June 2016.
5. See <https://www.seksuelevorming.nl/onderwijssoort/voortgezet-onderwijs/het-belang-van-seksuele-en-relationale-vorming-het-voortgezet> Accessed 10 August 2016.
6. See <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/soa-s-en-seksualiteit/inhoud/seksualiteit-van-jongeren>
7. See <https://www.uwkindenseks.nl/over-kinderen-en-pubers> and <https://www.uwkindenseks.nl/vrienden-en-groepsdruk> Accessed 14 June 2016.
8. See, for example, [sense.info](http://sense.info) [uwkindenseks.nl](http://uwkindenseks.nl) [seksuelevorming.nl](http://seksuelevorming.nl) and [begrensdiefde.nl](http://begrensdiefde.nl)

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