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Denying the sexual subject: schools' regulation of student sexuality

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This article examines some of the discourses and practices through which schools produce and regulate student sexual identities. It suggests that schools' 'official culture' can be seen as a discursive strategy which identifies a preferred student subject that is 'non-sexual'. This preference is communicated through the contradictory nature of discourses and practices which constitute 'official school culture' around student sexuality. These discourses work to simultaneously acknowledge student sexuality and position young people as 'childlike'. Through the tension created by these contradictory positionings, schools can be seen to undermine the kind of sexual agency that young people might access to support their sexual well-being. It is concluded that schools' deployment of discourses around sexuality produces student sexual positionings that may in fact dilute sexuality education's 'effectiveness' (in terms of the production of sexually responsible citizens).

There has been a plethora of research in recent years examining how students engage in processes of meaning making about sexual identity at school (Quinlivan and Town, 1999; Redman, 2001; Kehily, 2002; Haywood and Mac an Ghaill; 2003; Renold, 2004). This literature has disclosed how the daily routines and rituals of schooling produce sexual identities which students negotiate, adopt and resist as they carve out a sense of sexual self. As Kehily highlights, 'sexuality can be seen as a resource that is frequently used by teachers and pupils to create symbolic boundaries for speech and action' and which students employ in their struggle for an 'appropriate' sexual identity (Kehily, 2002, p. 119). This article contributes to the body of research that views schools as sites for the production of sexual identities (Mac an Ghaill, 1996; Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Epstein *et al.*, 2003). However, instead of focusing on how sexual identities are produced within 'pupil sexual cultures', it concentrates on the way the official culture of schools marks out certain student sexual positionings. The aim here is to consider how beneficial this constitution of student sexuality is for achieving

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sexuality education's goals (like encouraging safer sex) and engendering positive sexual experiences for young people.

The stimulus for this article was an international meeting convened in South Africa to discuss the effects and effectiveness of sexuality education. During discussions with colleagues I began to think about the ways in which student sexuality is constituted through different schooling practices and the relationship between this and sexuality education's effectiveness. My own research concerning young people, sexualities and education in New Zealand has taught me that there is often a gulf between schools' perception of student sexuality and young people's lived realities (Allen, 2001, 2003, 2004). A repeated critique of sexuality education by secondary school students in New Zealand, Australia and Britain is that its content is often not relevant to their needs, introduced too late and perceived as boring and overly scientific (Holland *et al.*, 1998; Measor *et al.*, 2000; Allen, 2005a). While I have argued elsewhere that young people's critique positions them as sexually knowing and active sexual decision makers, the sexuality education they are offered can depreciate this knowledge/experience and constitute them as childlike (Allen, 2005b). This article proposes that a school's deployment of discourses around sexuality produces particular student sexual positionings that may dilute sexuality education's 'effectiveness'. These discourses can be seen as problematic in the way they work to ultimately deny young people as sexual subjects and divest them of the kind of agency necessary to look after their sexual well-being.

It is proposed that despite appearing to formally acknowledge and accommodate student sexuality (through, for example, sexuality education), schools are heavily invested in a particular sort of student that is 'ideally' non-sexual. This sense of an 'ideally' non-sexual student emerges through the contradictory meanings schools offer students about their sexuality. One example explored here is the way in which students are recognised as sexual subjects through entreaties to 'practise safer sex' and yet also denied this positioning when schools refuse to dispense condoms. Through these sorts of contradictory practices schools communicate a preference for the non-sexual student. Denying young people's sexuality or constituting it negatively makes it harder for students to access the kind of sexual agency which might make their practice of safer sex more probable. A young person who views themselves as positively and legitimately sexual is typically in a much stronger position to act in ways that support their sexual well-being than someone who considers their sexuality as inherently 'wrong'. For instance, the stigma of being 'found out' buying or carrying condoms can prohibit their use for some young women (Holland *et al.*, 1991; Hillier *et al.*, 1998). The production of contradictory sexual identities can not only be disempowering for the student but ultimately may not serve what has been an underpinning philosophy of sexuality education's effectiveness—the production of sexually responsible citizens (Sears, 1992; Haywood, 1996).

The examples of discourses which constitute a contradictory and 'ideally' non-sexual student identity are drawn from my reflections about a project to design a sexuality education resource for senior school students (aged 16–19 years). Around

1187 volunteers in 15 schools through out New Zealand completed a questionnaire to determine what they felt they had already learned from sexuality education and what they would like to know more about in the future. This information would then be included in the design of the resource. Answers to an open-ended question, 'How could the sexuality education you have received so far at school be improved'?, prompted my thinking about the way student sexualities are produced within official school culture. Young people's criticisms of sexuality programmes elucidate a discursive strategy employed by schools that creates particular sexual subject positions. Three of these discourses and their associated practices are explored as they emerge around participants' comments about schools not distributing condoms, programme emphasis on sexual risks and the absence of details about how to engage in sexual activity.

Conceptual frameworks

The concept of 'official school culture' is employed to reveal how particular versions of student sexuality are sanctioned and promoted by the school. 'Schools can be understood as a site where a nexus of discourses in relation to sexuality are articulated and struggled over; moral/religious, medical, political and cultural' (Kehily, 2002, p. 53). These multiple and competing discourses are negotiated and contested as students (and teachers) make their own meanings from them. According to Foucault, institutions can also have a discourse which is internal to itself, 'one it employs to address itself, and which circulates amongst those that ensure its function' (Foucault, 1976, p. 28). Particular configurations of these discourses can be seen to make up the 'official culture of schools', contributing to a sense of institutional coherence by regulating daily routines and practices. This combination of discourses represents a 'discursive strategy' in the way they unify around a practical/political tendency (Foucault, 1976). In the case of the school's 'official school culture' around sexuality, the 'practical tendency' is typically the regulation of students' sexual identities in ways that do not disrupt the academic purpose of schooling.

As discourses are articulated around a nexus of power relations, those which comprise schools' 'official culture' will also reflect dominant interests. Schools are fundamentally modernist institutions which privilege rationality and the mind and marginalise the body and its desires (Paechter, 2004). A dominant view of the function of schooling in anglophone countries is that education of the mind is a priority and that issues of sexuality and the body are a distraction to be managed. Subsequently, a discursive strategy within schooling contexts is the problematisation and/or denial of sexuality's existence. The combination of discourses which comprise this strategy offers students particular types of sexual subject positionings. It is the implications of these positionings for young people's experience of sexuality and the effectiveness of sexuality programmes which will be discussed in ensuing sections.

Another central concept employed here is that of sexual agency. From a post-structural perspective, 'agency can be seen as a capacity that flows from discursive

formations' (Hekman, 1995, p. 3). The constitutive force of discourses is never completely realised (Sawicki, 1991) so that the subject is always in a state of 'becoming'. Agency appears in the spaces where contradictory discourses compete for the constitution of the subject and enable ways of being which contest 'the normal'. However, within post-structural thought the subject does not simply 'choose' the discourse within which they wish to operate. Due to the power of discourse we are not simply subjects of our own making. The fact that discourses are intimately involved with mutable power relations suggests that we can 'never be ensnared by power; we can always modify its grip in determinate conditions following a precise strategy' (Foucault, 1980, p. 13). According to Hekman, 'the resistant subject is one that refuses to be scripted by the dominant discourse and turns instead to subjugated knowledges to fashion alternative discourses of subjectivity' (Hekman, 1995, p. 84). This 'turning' can be seen as partly determined by the discursive resources to which we have access, which are in turn mediated by structural and material positionings (Allen, 2003).

The importance of this conceptualisation of agency in relation to sexuality is that the experience of pleasurable safer sexual practice is aligned with a subject's exercise of power. Agency enables the subject to act in ways which offer greater control over what happens in sexual situations rather than simply leaving this to chance or to the power exercised by others. This point is highlighted by the work of the Women, Risk and AIDS Project in Britain, which has shown how:

> young women's ability to choose safer sexual practices, or to refuse unsafe (or any other) sexual activity, [is] not an issue of free choice between equals, but one of negotiation within structurally unequal social relationships. (Holland *et al.*, 1998, p. 6)

Within this framework of gendered relations of power young women who have access to agency are more likely to be able to negotiate sexual activity within intimate relationships. Sexual agency may also be particularly important for young men who have sex with men, where power differentials between partners may exist on the basis of age, ethnicity, experience in the gay scene, physical ability, etc. For instance, Fenaughty's (2004) research reveals how some young gay men who are sexually inexperienced can feel coerced into being the receptive partner of anal sex. For these young men exercising greater power over what (if any) sexual activity occurs could have important implications for their experience of pleasurable, safer sex.

How student sexual identities are discursively produced by schools may play an important role in young people's exercise of sexual agency. For schools to provide young people with space to be 'sexual agents' they must first be recognised as a particular sort of subject. This is a subject whose sexuality is considered as a legitimate and positive aspect of subjectivity. As the ensuing discussion will show, typically, young people are not discursively constituted by schools in this way.

The protective discourse in sexuality education

A protective discourse around young people's sexuality forms part of many New Zealand schools' 'official culture'. This discourse suggests young people need

protecting from the (potential) dangers and negative consequences associated with sexual activity (Fine, 1988). Such a discourse draws on essentialist ideas about sexuality as biologically determined and hormonally driven, with student sexuality constituted as dangerous because it can propel young people to act in ways that are detrimental to their health. Young people are seen to be especially susceptible to their bodily urges as they negotiate the period defined as adolescence, which is characterised by emotional volatility. This perceived 'turmoil' renders young people less capable of making decisions that will support their sexual well-being, increasing their vulnerability and thus 'need' for protective guidance from school and family. A protective discourse also carries an assumption that sexual activity is an inherently 'risky business' rather than a potentially positive and pleasurable experience. This idea derives from what Mort (1987) characterises as medico-moral discourses of sexuality where medical insights about physical risk are aligned with moral and religious doctrine as a means of regulating sexual behaviour. Within such discourses sexual intercourse is only 'safe' within the sanctity of marriage and outside this context has supposedly 'dangerous' implications. A protective discourse suggests that young people need to learn to protect themselves from their own desires, with sexuality education providing a vehicle for informing them about what sexual dangers they could encounter and how to prevent them.

The operation of this protective discourse is evident in many sexuality education programmes, where there is an emphasis on managing sexual 'risk'. Often programmes concentrate on arming young people with knowledge about how to avoid unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmissible infections to the exclusion of other topics (Jackson, 1978; Thomson & Scott, 1991; Measor *et al.*, 2000; Hirst, 2004). This emphasis is apparent in an informal survey of workbook resources used within sexuality programmes in New Zealand secondary schools (Allen, 2005). While some information about sexual feelings and relationships was included in workbook resources, most content was dedicated to preventing 'negative' outcomes of sexual behaviour. For example, in a booklet used in an all boys' school, 22 out of 26 pages were devoted to sexually transmitted infections, with a special emphasis on HIV/AIDS, reproductive biology, personal hygiene and abortion statistics. Lenskyj (1990) labels this a 'plumbing and prevention' approach to sexuality education, where clinical, technical and negative aspects of sexuality comprise the favoured content.

This form of sexuality education has received long-standing criticism from researchers and educators but continues to haunt many contemporary programmes (Jackson, 1982). The endurance of this discourse can be partly attributed to its institutional entrenchment within governmental health and education policy. Negative consequences of sexual activity take an economic and social toll on the state and therefore their reduction/elimination continues to have significant social benefits. Within the New Zealand context the priority to reduce sexually transmissible infections and unplanned pregnancies is evident in the space dedicated to both of these in the latest *Sexual and Reproductive Health Strategy* (Ministry of Health, 2001). School sexuality resources exhibiting this emphasis on

'negative' outcomes of sexual activity reflect and support such ongoing policy initiatives.

Young people are themselves aware of this discourse of protection within sexuality education. In the research outlined above participants were critical of the way sexual risk was a focus of programmes to the exclusion of other topics they perceived as important. The following young woman's comments typify these responses with her call that sexuality education be improved, with, 'More info on other things other than sexually transmitted diseases' (Puriri College, Female).[1] In their suggestions for how sexuality education could be improved many participants made reference to the sorts of topics they wanted covered (in some instances this was a case of more comprehensive coverage). Issues mentioned included: same-sex attraction, homophobia, transgender issues, teenage parenthood, pregnancy, how to make sexual activity more enjoyable for both partners, as well as emotions in relationships. Epstein and Johnson (1998) note that discursive strategies 'often link different nodes or sites: the family, school and state for instance' (p. 16). A discourse of protection as described above reaches across pupil culture, official curriculum content and governmental health and education policy. The location of this discourse in multiple sites contributes to its power as a practice which normalises our perception of young people's sexuality.

A discourse of protection constitutes young people as childlike and in need of protection. It does this by suggesting that young people are in need of saving, mostly from the realisation of their own desires (as well as those who might take advantage of them). As Monk explains, in sexuality education:

> the emphasis throughout is on *protecting* young people from early sex and the negative consequences of sex. Practical information is in this way legitimized through the language of 'child saving', welfare and the discourses of protection; an approach that again reinforces the image of children as innocent and dependent as opposed to 'sexually knowing' and 'autonomous'. (Monk, 2001, p. 277)

Sexuality education's concentration on information about the dangers of sexual activity suggests that young people's expressions of sexuality are 'a risk'. This message reinforces the idea that sexuality is something that should inspire trepidation and should not be freely enjoyed. In constituting expressions of sexuality as 'risky' young people are also discursively positioned as vulnerable. This positioning implies a subject who lacks agency and is unlikely to appeal to young peoples' (or for that matter adults') sense of themselves as exercising power. A discourse of protection denies young people a positioning as autonomous sexual subjects and the type of subjectivity which is more likely to engender the negotiation of safer sex practice and pleasurable sexual experiences. Rather than offering young people a sense of empowerment, this discourse, which purports to operate for their 'protection', provides them with an understanding of themselves as vulnerable.

This kind of constitution of student sexual identity may work against what has been historically upheld as a marker of sexuality education's effectiveness—encouraging young people's condom use. Within this discourse student sexual identity is produced at the intersection of the idea of the child as 'sexually innocent'

and the notion of the young person who must practise safer sex. The tension and lack of coherence in this constitution of student identity within schools' official culture appears to disable young people from being sexually responsible. This situation arises because, while being urged to use condoms, a discourse of protection positions young people with childlike vulnerability and an associated lack of agency. From this perspective a discourse of protection operates to undermine one of sexuality education's espoused goals of producing students who can act in sexually responsible ways.

The missing discourse of desire in sexuality education

In her classic paper based on research in American schools Fine (1988) described the way in which a discourse of desire was missing from sex education, especially for young women. In its place sex education promoted discourses of sexuality as violence, victimisation and immorality. Since this seminal work a number of feminist researchers in other parts of the world have corroborated Fine's findings revealing that young women's desire and sexual pleasure remain a silence in many sexuality programmes (Thomson & Scott 1991; Measor *et al.*, 2000; Allen, 2001; Burns & Torre, 2005). According to Fine (1988), a discourse of desire 'would invite adolescents to explore what feels good and bad, desirable and undesirable, grounded in experience, needs, and limits … would enable an analysis of the dialectics of victimization and pleasure, and would pose female adolescents as subjects of sexuality' (p. 33).

One of the consequences of not including desire and pleasure within sexuality programmes is their sanitisation. Sexuality education which is devoid of a discourse of desire becomes de-eroticised, concentrating instead on the mechanics of bodily processes like reproduction and menstruation in ways which are divorced from the sensual/sexual (Jackson, 1978). The hallmark of such programmes are their extensive coverage of topics like how sexually transmissible diseases are contracted and treated, the importance of condom use and reasons for delaying sexual activity. These issues are perceived as easier and less controversial to teach than sexual desire and pleasure, which necessitate recognising young people as desiring and pleasure-seeking subjects (Munro & Ballard, 2004). This positioning of student sexuality may be anxiety provoking for teachers and care givers because of the way it refuses a conceptualisation of young people as sexually innocent. Programme emphasis on what can go wrong with sexual activity means that young people's sexuality is viewed negatively. This sex-negative approach renders the expression of sexual desire and experience of sexual pleasure as 'wrong' and 'risky' unless undertaken in specific conditions (i.e. in marriage or a long-term, loving, committed relationship, with a partner of the opposite gender, using a condom etc.)

Research participants identified this missing discourse of desire within school sexuality programmes. Their comments about how sexuality education could be improved often made reference to the way that the logistics of sexual activity were omitted. These sorts of responses saw young men and women call for 'more [details]

about actual sex, intercourse' (Matai College, Male), information about 'what could make a sexual experience safe and fun (Rata College, Male) as well as 'More sex tips!' (Kowhai College, Female) and 'Detailed pictures of sexual positions' (Rimu College, Female). Their justification for such information was that as senior school students they knew 'the basics' and often had experience of relationships involving sexual activity. These sorts of criticisms of sexuality education have also emerged in British-based research. Participants in Measor *et al.*'s (2000) study complained that sex education 'did not deal directly with sex and with the experience of sexuality [and] it failed to give them explicit information about a number of topics' (Measor *et al.*, 2000, p. 122). In the current research young people's comments often conveyed frustration that sexuality education did not warrant them with the maturity to be given such details. In this vein one young woman explained that schools 'take a naïve approach to students' sexual experience' (Totara College, Female) and were thought to underestimate what they already know about sexuality.

When a discourse of desire is missing from sexuality programmes this de-eroticised form of education produces a number of limiting sexual positionings for young people. Failing to provide details about sexual activity which young people want to know about positions them as 'childlike'. In denying what young people deem important, sexuality education asserts an overriding authority which reduces their agency and subordinates their concerns. Through this practice the school institutes a hierarchy of power where it becomes the 'substitute parent' determining what its 'child' can/can't do, should/should not know. This situation exists despite the fact that senior school students might be considered young adults who can legally engage in consensual sexual relations at age 16.

Young people are also constituted as 'childlike' through de-eroticised sexuality programmes in the way it removes the 'sexual' from this education. By not giving answers to their questions about the logistics of sexual activity or embodied experiences of sensuality, young people are constituted as lacking the maturity to receive this information. A curriculum that suggests that knowledge about sensuality/sexuality is not as important as knowing about sexual risk does not address a sexual/sensual student. Instead it posits young people as 'non-sexual' (or preferably non-sexual) by avoiding information that would deem them sexual subjects. Talking about the use of condoms in the absence of a positive experience of sexual desire renders young people's engagement in sexual activity a theoretical possibility rather than a practical probability. Answering young people's requests for details about sensual/sexual embodiment would recognise their sexual expression as legitimate.

These sexual positionings may be seen as counterproductive for sexuality education's 'effectiveness'. The frustration expressed in young people's comments that schools view them naively indicates that the way participants understand their own sexual subjectivities may diverge from identities offered by sexuality education's discourses. Research into how young people understand their sexual selves indicates that they are unlikely to perceive themselves as 'childlike' and 'non-sexual' (Holland *et al.*, 1998; Kehily, 2002; Allen, 2003). When sexuality education produces them in

this way it sits in tension with many young people's own conceptualisations of self. If sexuality education does not resonate with young people's lived experience they can become disengaged from its messages about sexual risk. To feel that programme messages have relevance for them, young people need to recognise themselves in the meanings they offer. Programmes which open discursive space for young people's own sexual subjectivities, rather than positioning them in ways they would prefer students to be, are more likely to have their lessons heard.

Use a condom (but we can't supply you with one)

One of sexuality education's central messages in New Zealand schools is 'use a condom'. This message forms part of the discourse of protection which renders young people at risk from sexually transmissible infections and unplanned pregnancy. The call to use condoms is historically entrenched in sex education's philosophy. Since Ettie Rout's campaign during the First World War to stymie rates of venereal disease, it was recognised that promoting condom use was a successful way of reducing the incidence of sexually transmissible infections (Smyth, 2000). Sexuality education offered a convenient vehicle through which to deliver the message of condom use and subsequently this pronouncement has become a feature of many school programmes. Sexually transmissible infections remain a cogent political concern in contemporary New Zealand. In some parts of the country chlamydia rates are six times higher than those reported in Australia and four times higher than those reported in the UK (Environmental Science and Research, 2003). HIV is also on the increase, with a steady rise in the last 15 years in the number of reported heterosexual transmissions. The largest incidence of HIV in men who have sex with men was also reported in 2003, with 93 new cases (AIDS Epidemiology Group, 2004). These statistics continue to provide official justification for the endurance of 'the use a condom' message within sexuality programmes.

In many mainstream schools the approach to student sexual activity is to encourage young people not to have sexual intercourse (and in those more liberal environments at least until they are ready). New Zealand research indicates that more than 20% of secondary school students are sexually active (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2003). Given that sexual activity is a reality for many young people, schools often promote the view that if students engage in sexual activity they should ensure effective condom use. The manner in which this message is delivered varies from school to school depending on factors like the school's attitude towards sexually active students, the teacher's ability to communicate this information and use of external educators such as the Family Planning Association. In the research I conducted it was evident that what sometimes transpired was students being encouraged to use condoms, but not always provided with adequate knowledge of how to. As one young woman explained, sexuality education would be improved if there were 'Demo's on how to put a condom on! We know to use them, just not how! We get told how to, but we need practice' (Pohutakawa College). Another criticism participants made of sexuality education was that while exhorting young

people to use condoms, some schools did not/would not provide students with them. Participants indicated that to ameliorate sexuality education, 'Schools should give out free condoms to 5, 6 and 7 form students[2] (Hebe College, Male) and that 'Teachers [should] hand out contraception at school' (Kowhai College, Female). These comments highlighted an incongruity between sexuality programmes' decree of condom use and some schools' reluctance to provide students with condoms or allow on-site vending machines.

Asserting that students should use a condom if they are going to engage in sexual activity indicates a school's recognition that young people can be sexual subjects. The recognised need for information about condoms and prescriptions for their use casts young people as having desires which they have the potential to act on. This acknowledgement, however, is framed within a discourse of protection constituting young people's sexuality as a risk and its expression as leading to potential danger. Constituted in this way young people's sexuality is also associated with 'fear' for all that can potentially go wrong in a sexual encounter. When constituted within an overriding discourse of condom use young people's sexuality is not presented as a 'natural' and 'positive' element of subjectivity. Within this discourse any positive experience of sexuality is typically overshadowed by the threat of negative consequences and the responsibility of successfully employing a condom.

When pronouncements to use a condom are not reinforced by the school's material provision of them, the production of student sexual identity within official school culture is splintered. At the same time that students are constituted as sexual subjects through 'the use a condom' message, the failure to follow through with this conceptualisation undermines any sense of sexual agency it might carry. The result is that while schools recognise students as potentially sexual subjects, their withholding of condoms expresses their preference that they are not sexual. In this sense, the constitution of young people as sexual agents is 'lip service' because the practice of not supplying condoms renders them once again (preferably) 'sexually innocent'. While the constitution of student sexual identity is fractured by the tension of these discourses, the school's official view of student sexuality can still be considered coherent. In line with the traditional perception of school's function as concerned with academic matters (i.e. education of the mind) it is the non-sexual student who is promoted within official school culture. The prevalence of this production of student sexuality is grounded in material power. In other words, 'actions speak louder than words' and the action of not providing condoms has material implications for the student identities schools produce.

These contradictory positionings around student sexual identity can divest young people of the agency to enact sexuality education's safer sex message. Agency is first lost at the literal level of not having a condom to use (if young people haven't been brave enough/able to access them from other sources). It is also lost at the discursive level in that to be considered a sexual subject (which presupposes agency to make and enact sexual decisions) young people must first be constituted as sexual. School's non-provision of condoms positions young people with a preference for being non-sexual. Some young people may resent this positioning which serves to

regulate their sexual behaviour because not expressing their sexuality may be considered unrealistic. As Aggleton and Campbell (2000) explain, to be effective sexuality education must meet the needs and interests of young people as conceptualised by them. When programmes do not view young people in the way they conceptualise themselves, then their messages are less likely to resonate with them.

Concluding comments

This article has examined some of discourses and practices through which schools regulate student sexual identities. Through a missing discourse of desire, an emphasis on sexual 'risk' and pronouncements to practice safer sex (but failure to always distribute condoms) schools mark out particular student sexual identities. The effect of these discourses is a contradictory set of positionings which simultaneously cast young people as sexual decision makers and 'childlike'. This inconsistency is witnessed in the way the schools' provision of sexuality education acknowledges young people's sexuality, but its typically de-eroticised format concomitantly desexualises them. This splintering of the subject not only poses tensions for young people's sexual expression, but communicates that schools have a preferred student identity. In accordance with the conventional perception of the function of schooling as purely an academic enterprise, it is the student who is non-sexual that is favoured.

The contradictory nature of these student sexual positionings may work against achieving the traditional aims of sexuality education (i.e. promoting safer sex). Within the official culture of many schools young people are ultimately denied as sexual subjects. It is when young people are positioned as sexual subjects that they are afforded better access to the kind of agency which may make safer sex more probable. When young people are recognised as 'sexual' and seen to be able to exercise sexual decision-making power, discursive space is opened for a sexually responsible subject.[3] Discursive strategies which serve to preserve young people's innocence can divest them of this sexual agency, because this negates their ability to practise safer sex.

As explained earlier, the focus of this article has been on how schools constitute student sexual identities rather than how young people engage with the discourses which comprise school's official culture. The way young people negotiate such positionings is an important consideration in ascertaining the effect of these discursive constructions. Previous research suggests that while schools offer young people particular sexual positionings, these are not automatically taken up by them (Allen, 2003; Hirst, 2004; Renold, 2004). While schools have a significant interest in students being non-sexual, many young people have an investment in constructing identities that utilise sexuality. Sexuality is a major site through which masculinities are constructed. Being 'a bloke', for example, might be cultivated through a performance of sexual prowess while the identity of 'wimp' is characterised by femininity or asexuality (Mac an Ghaill, 1994). Similarly, the cultivation of an

'appropriately' feminine identity involves demonstrating sexual interest in men through a performance of desire that is apparent but not unchecked (Lees, 1993; Tolman, 2002). There maybe advantages in knowing how young people resist schools' discursive strategies to constitute them as 'ideally' non-sexual and where their experience of sexuality is positive for themselves and other people. Understanding how they achieve this may offer insight into building capacity within sexuality education and school culture more widely to support these sorts of outcomes.

The above analysis suggests that there maybe more positive outcomes for young people's experience of sexuality if some schools changed how they constitute student sexual identities. Within the discourses and their associated practices examined here there is no space to see student sexuality as legitimate and positive. The discursive strategy schools often employ is to regulate student sexual identities in ways that do not disrupt the academic purpose of schooling and that lead to the denial or problematisation of the sexual student. An acknowledgement that students are sexual, that this is not a nuisance or problem but rather part of life, warrants young people with the kind of agency that enables safer sexual practice. This construction is also less likely to sit in tension with young people's own perception of themselves as sexual subjects and be understood as better reflecting their lived realities. Constituting student sexuality as legitimate and positive may open up more spaces for young people to be the kinds of sexual subjects desired by the Health and Physical Education curriculum: the kind of subjects who can 'act in ways that contribute to their personal well-being, the well-being of other people, and that of society as a whole' (Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 1999, p. 6). Enabling the existence of this kind of understanding of student sexuality involves more than a positive attitude towards students as sexual subjects. The challenge is the transformation of official school culture that views sexualities, desire and pleasure as diametrically opposed to academic schooling objectives.

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Notes

1. All schools in the research are identified by a pseudonym, e.g. Puriri College. These pseudonyms refer to New Zealand native plants.
2. Forms 5, 6 and 7 are the last three years of secondary school.
3. It needs to be noted here that sexual agency is gendered and that access to power in sexual relationships is mediated by unequal power relationships between women and men (see Holland *et al.*, 1998; Allen, 2003). Subsequently, young women's access to sexual agency is more complicated.

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