

<b>Institution: Institute of Education</b>
<b>Unit of Assessment: 25</b>
<b>Title of case study: ‘Sexting’ and the school curriculum: research for gender equality in the digital world</b>
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)

Jessica Ringrose’s research on young people, social media and sexuality has helped raise awareness nationally and internationally about the implications of new media for young people’s relationships, self-image and physical and emotional well-being and safety. Studying digital-age phenomena such as ‘sexting’ and ‘slut-shaming’, Ringrose has attracted substantial but overwhelmingly sensitive press coverage and sparked serious public discussion on difficult issues. She has influenced national and third sector guidelines on sex and relationship education and on internet controls and her work has underpinned resources for schools. She has advised on a series of government reports and inspired a very influential speech by Diane Abbott MP on the sexualisation of society.

<b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)
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**Context:** Teenagers, especially girls, face contradictory expectations in our increasingly sexualised Western society. Digital technology has added to the complexity of the routes they have to negotiate in order to stay both ‘cool’ and ‘safe’. Ringrose studies the way young people manage these pressures, rise above them, or are hurt by them. She seeks to help schools and youth services to provide sex and relationship education that will help them value themselves, challenge sexism and appreciate sex without feeling pressured. Ringrose has very effectively used research and consultancy opportunities, working in schools to research these important new areas of study.

**Children, young people and ‘sexting’:** There was little information on the extent or nature of ‘sexting’ – defined as the exchange of sexual messages or images through mobile phones and the internet – when Ringrose and her colleagues began this pioneering pilot study for the NSPCC (see research reference **R2**). They showed that teenagers were more at risk from interactions with peers than with strangers. The cutting-edge, in-depth research enabled by the NSPCC project has led to a 2013 academic journal article (**R3**).

**How the research was conducted:** This qualitative study is based on focus groups and in-depth interviews with 35 young people aged 13 and 15 in two London schools. Researchers also mapped some of their activities online and interviewed teachers and other staff.

**Main findings:** Schoolgirls are facing increasing pressure to provide sexually explicit pictures of themselves via phone or internet. While some girls are developing sophisticated techniques to deal with these pressures, others – particularly younger children – are left struggling to cope and unsure what to do. The ‘sexting’ phenomenon revealed the wider sexual pressures girls were under. Girls could be pestered relentlessly for images of their bodies and to perform sexual acts, which might then be recorded on mobile phones and circulated, traded, posted or broadcast, leaving the victim to face ridicule and abuse. Neither boys nor girls were sure about how to navigate sexual communication and relationships, particularly when they became coercive, both online and at school. While technology amplified the age-old problem of double-standards in judging girls’ and boys’ sexual behaviour, there was also a blurring between online and offline sexual harassment. Young people felt there was silence and secrecy around ‘sexting’ and were afraid of being labelled ‘snitches’ or ‘snakes’ if they spoke to adults. They uniformly asked for more support at school.

**Conclusions:** Researchers called for:

- Clear government expectations on schools to enable discussion of sexual pressures and mobile technologies as part of the curriculum.
- Support and training for teachers and possible use of peer mentors.
- Safety initiatives that provide support for girls without treating ‘sexting’ as a girl-only problem.
- Technology providers to make it easy to block harmful messages or images.

**Researchers:** This 2012 NSPCC-funded study was led by Dr Jessica Ringrose, IOE. Researchers were: Professor Rosalind Gill, King’s College, London, Professor Sonia Livingstone (LSE) and Laura Harvey (OU). Ringrose was made a professor in July 2013.

**Impact case study (REF3b)**

**Girls and the sexual politics of schooling:** Ringrose's research on teenage girls (e.g. **R4**, **R5**) underpins the arguments set out in her theoretical papers and books on girlhood in a post-feminist age (**R1**, **R4**). Her book, *Postfeminist Education?* (**R1**), uses in-depth qualitative, interview-based research studies with girls aged 12-16 in three schools, and argues that despite widespread notions that most gender equality issues have been addressed in Western society, girls face increasing pressures around sexualisation and sexism in their peer groups, at school and in society. The findings show that teen girls are savvy producers of digital media – often “speaking back” to slut-shaming or other sexual bullying -- but that they also need support in navigating a popular media context that remains rife with sexism and sexual violence. She holds that young sexual girlhood is being ‘re-victimised’ and ‘re-shamed’, with the girl body again the focal point of a patriarchal, moralising gaze. This dynamic ends up making real feminine sexual desires invisible in school and beyond. She argues that, rather than demonising girls for becoming overly ‘sexualised’ and aggressive, educators should concentrate on equipping girls and boys equally with tools to develop healthy relationships and emotional well-being. Ringrose concludes that sex education needs to deal with issues such as sexual bullying, ‘slut shaming’ and youth as users of pornography, “opening up spaces to discuss girls’ own desires, in order to foster girls’ bodily and sexual autonomy”. The book offers new theoretical and methodological tools for researching post-feminism, girlhood and education, exploring the use of interviews and online observations of social networking to work with girls to understand how they construct online identities and relationships.

<b>3. References to the research</b> (indicative maximum of six references)
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- R1: Ringrose, J. (2012) *Postfeminist Education: Girls and the sexual politics of schooling*, Routledge: London
- R2: Ringrose, J., Gill, R., Livingstone, S., Harvey, L. (2012) *A Qualitative Study of Children, Young People and 'Sexting'*. London: NSPCC
- R3: Ringrose, J., Harvey, L., Gill, R. & Livingstone, S. (2013) Teen girls, sexual double standards and 'sexting': Gendered value in digital image exchange, *Feminist Theory*, 14(3), 305-323
- R4: Ringrose, J. & Renold, E. (2010) Normative cruelties and gender deviants: The performative effects of bully discourses for girls and boys in school, *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(4), 573-596.
- R5: Ringrose, J. (2008) 'Just be friends': Exposing the limits of educational bully discourses for understanding teen girls' heterosexualized friendships and conflicts, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29(5), 509-522.

**Indicators of quality:**

- IQ1: Research projects following the design of **R2** are taking place in Wales, South Western UK, Australia, Denmark and Canada.
- IQ2: The interim report of the UK Safer Internet Centre research project on 'sexting' (SW England) has cited **R2** as 'ground-breaking' (Phippen, 2012).

<b>4. Details of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 750 words)
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**Principal beneficiaries:** Those who develop policy and guidance on issues such as internet safety, bullying and PSHE; teenagers and their teachers; wider society, particularly parents and families who face new challenges in understanding and supporting young people's ethical uses of mobile technology in an increasingly digital culture.

**Date of impact:** 2008-13, with particularly high impact in 2012, with the NSPCC 'sexting' study and, in 2013, with the influential speech by Diane Abbott MP to the Fabian Women's Network critiquing and challenging the 'pornification' of British society.

**Reach and significance:** The research struck a popular chord because so little was understood by the adult world about youth, gender and sexuality in the digital age. Ringrose's findings made it clear that school policies and curriculum, including PSHE sessions, needed to do more. The research has raised awareness of these issues across the UK and internationally, inspiring further studies in several countries and considerable debate – including substantial media coverage in UK, USA, Canada and Australia. It has informed guidelines, resources, government and third sector reports and ministerial thinking. Ultimately, it could help girls and boys to resist sexual bullying and

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pressure. Its impact has been instrumental<sup>1</sup> (affecting policy and practice) and conceptual (sparking public debate and greater political awareness).

**Conceptual impact:** Ever since her research on teen girls and social networking was first profiled in the TES in 2008 – and followed up in a range of national broadsheets – Ringrose has walked a careful and successful path through the media minefield. Given the nature of her subjects – which could easily spark salacious coverage – she has overwhelmingly achieved the ‘right’ kind of impact. Working with press officers at the IOE, and later the NSPCC, she has led a sensitive public discourse on uncomfortable subjects, resulting in generally positive messages about the need for gender equality in schools and society. Partly because of this responsible and measured, but substantial, press coverage, she developed a profile as expert adviser on girlhood and ‘sexualisation’, leading to much of the impact detailed below.

**Public engagement:** *Diane Abbott:* Ringrose was invited to meet the MP after an aide drew Abbott’s attention to the *Huffington Post*’s report on her book *Postfeminist Education* (R1). Drawing heavily on Ringrose’s research and recommendations, the then shadow health minister called for a “revolution” in sex education to combat Britain’s emerging “hypersexualised culture”. “We need to start a national conversation between parents and their children about sex, pornography and technology”, she said. Abbott credited Ringrose’s ideas: “Today’s speech was inspired by academic Dr Jessica Ringrose who argues in her book *Postfeminist Education* that sexually active school girls are often ‘slut shamed’ and bullied by their peers”, noted at least one newspaper (see impact source S6). A Google search finds tens of thousands of references to Abbott’s ‘pornification’ speech, including coverage in every major UK news outlet, worldwide coverage and intense debate in the blogosphere. The BBC’s report alone received 579 comments and the Guardian’s report a further 255. The *Huffington Post* article attracted 336 comments on its website. The speech resulted in extensive public engagement with Ringrose’s findings and ideas.

**Media and seminars:** Ringrose has appeared in such outlets as BBC Radio Woman’s Hour and Elle Magazine (UK), and was academic adviser to a *Panorama* television programme, which also interviewed her. She has participated in numerous seminars and conferences, speaking to multiple stakeholders. These include keynoting for a Welsh Government conference for teachers and students on ‘Children, Sexuality and Sexualisation’ (2011), the UK Council for Psychotherapy’s child and adolescent therapy conference (2012) and the All Wales Sexual Health Network conference (2013). She convened a cutting edge international conference for practitioners, campaigners, activists and academics on ‘pornification’ at the IOE in 2011.

**Impact on policy:** Ringrose has advised on reports and reviews in the UK and Europe since 2008.

- Her research was cited 16 times in the 2010 Home Office report, *The Sexualisation of Young People*, on which she was an Expert Advisor (S5). Its author, Linda Papadopoulos, confirms that Ringrose’s research (e.g. R5) and advice helped shape recommendations for schools on sexualisation, sexual bullying and gender equality. “Her groundbreaking research on how young people use and interact on social networking sites and her discussions of how to address sexual cyber-bullying through the views of young people helped shape the recommendations around new media technology”, Papadopoulos adds (S4). The *Sexualisation* report had a significant influence on policy and government attitudes to sexualisation.
- Ringrose served on the Advisory Group for the Scottish Parliament report: *Sexualised Goods Aimed at Children* (2010).
- She was a founding member of the Equalities Office ‘Campaign for Body Confidence’ which has influenced policies on health and gender and well-being in schools (since 2011).

Ringrose has also advised many charities on these issues, as outlined below.

**‘Sexting’:** In 2011, because of her growing reputation as a Government adviser on childhood sexualisation, she was invited to lead a project for the NSPCC (R2). The research was launched in Parliament through invitation from Claire Perry MP and Equalities Minister Lynne Featherstone and was widely reported. By July 31 2013, the report had been downloaded nearly 2000 times from the NSPCC website and was posted on many others. The charity re-drafted its policy recommendations in its wake, calling for “all professionals to receive training in the latest technology so that they are better equipped to deal with sexting” and arguing that “secondary schools and the communications industry should give young people better protection through education which promotes considerate, respectful relationships”. The study’s finding that young

<sup>1</sup> Using Evidence: How Research can Inform Public Services (Nutley, S., Walter, I., Davis, H. 2007)

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people would value more opportunities to discuss these issues with their parents helped to inform an NSPCC campaign designed to help parents help younger children stay safe (S9). In addition:

- The UK Safer Internet Centre has cited the research as critical in understanding how younger children are using digital media, while participating in the report's launch prompted the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Centre to call for research with younger children.
- The study is a resource on Public Health England's Child and Maternal Health Intelligence Network, which supports policy-makers, commissioners, managers and regulators.
- Vodafone's *Digital Parenting* website and magazine cite Ringrose in their 'sexting' advice (S7).
- NSPCC discussed the report's findings in its submission to the Home Affairs Select Committee's inquiry on E-Crime (2012-13).
- Ringrose advised on the Family Lives report, *All of our concern: commercialisation, sexualisation and hypermasculinity* (2012), which made extensive use of the findings.
- YWCA Scotland used the research in its submission to a Scottish Parliamentary select committee inquiry into teen pregnancy.
- The Australian government linked to the report on its Institute of Family Studies website (S1).
- The study is cited in several submissions to a legal 'sexting' inquiry in Victoria, Australia (S2).

**Impact on practice and resources:** Ringrose's work has underpinned school resources, national guidance and an OU teaching film. TeenBoundaries: As a consultant for the UK charity Family Lives, Ringrose's body of research has influenced its TeenBoundaries sex and relationships education workshops, which have benefitted more than 7,000 young people aged 11-18. In 2012, the charity used the NSPCC report to re-tool its resources for schools, designing two new workshops to address 'sexting' and pornography, "two of the biggest challenges facing young people in today's society", according to the charity (S3). By July 2013, these lessons had reached more than 2500 students and 400 professionals attended workshops.

National guidance: Ringrose's research helped underpin the first government-supported guidance for schools on 'sexting', published in March 2013 and she was also consulted. The pack, which was prepared by CEOP and Securus, the manufacturer of child protection software, in collaboration with the DfE, Medway Council and several teaching organisations and charities, points to the double-standards highlighted in the NSPCC study (S8).

Additional resources: The PSHE Association published a briefing on the NSPCC report; the Sex Education Forum (UK) cites it as a resource; and Optimus Education, an online hub for school leaders, published an extensive review of the study in its news bulletin (S10), recommending that its readers "download the full report and use it for staff meeting discussions". The report informed freelance trainer Aylssa Cowell's workshops, attended by some 50 teachers, social workers, youth workers and school nurses between July 2012 and May 2013. Cowell used the research to create a card game for discussing relationships and sexuality in a safe way. Organisations linking to the report include Digital Disruption, an education project promoting digital judgment skills, and CRUSH, a charity supporting young people suffering or at risk of domestic abuse. In spring 2013, teaching union ATL commissioned Ringrose and a colleague to help develop new video resources on 'sexting', heralding the next generation of materials on this important topic.

<b>5. Sources to corroborate the impact<sup>2</sup></b> (indicative maximum of 10 references)
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S1: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/cfca/bibliographies/bullying.php>

S2: [http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/lawrefrom/isexting/subs/S21\\_-\\_Womens\\_Health\\_West.pdf](http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/lawrefrom/isexting/subs/S21_-_Womens_Health_West.pdf)

S3: Testimonial from Family Lives (available)

S4: Testimonial from Linda Papadopoulou (available)

S5: <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/10738/1/sexualisation-young-people.pdf>

S6: <http://www.theweek.co.uk/uk-news/51129/diane-abbott-pornification-society-damaging-family>

S7: [http://theparentzone.co.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/DP%20article%20sexting\\_0.pdf](http://theparentzone.co.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/DP%20article%20sexting_0.pdf)

S8: National sexting guidance: <http://www.naace.co.uk/esafety/sexting>

S9: Comments from Jon Brown, NSPCC (available)

S10: <http://clc2.uniservity.com/GroupDownloadFile.asp?GroupID=394938&ResourceId=3600818>

<sup>2</sup> All web links accessed 11/11/13