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Teachers' perspectives on relationships and sex education lessons in England

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ABSTRACT

Recent changes to the law in England require all primary schools to teach Relationships Education and all secondary schools to teach Relationships and Sex Education (RSE). Our focus in this article is on the voices of teachers and other educational professionals in relation to this change. Discussion in three focus groups held with 16 educational professionals, indicated concerns regarding some of the challenges associated with the implementation of the new legal requirements, as well as recognising fresh opportunities afforded to teachers for engaging with children and young people. Through analysis, it was noted that participants considered how lessons on relationships and sex should cover LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, others) issues, with strategies advanced for building bridges between schools and parents/communities. Our research indicates a difference between the importance of Relationships Education/RSE and the perceptions of those charged with teaching it, as well as the view that the laudable aims underpinning the new provisions in England will only be realised if appropriate support and training is given to teachers.

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Introduction

The question of how schools should educate their pupils about sex and relationships has long been associated with controversy in England (Cook 2012; Hampshire 2005; Pilcher 2005). In recent years, contentious issues in this regard have included: unhealthy relationships (Abbott, Weckesser, and Egan 2021); consent (Bragg et al. 2021); LGBTQ inclusion (Epps, Markowski, and Cleaver 2021); gender (Whittington 2021); sexual health (Brook 2020); and the place of religious or secular values in lessons (Sell and Reiss 2022).

Mindful of such considerations, it is perhaps unsurprising that recent changes in the law governing sex and relationships lessons in England have generated controversy (Hymas 2019). Fears of an erosion of parent's rights have led to complaints from conservative religious groups about 'ideological indoctrination and sexualisation' in the classroom (Christian Concern 2021) whilst, there have been demonstrations (Griffiths and Ramzan 2019), protests outside schools (BBC 2019), and even reports of threats

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against teachers (Ferguson 2019). Similar concerns were expressed by a Member of Parliament, Miriam Cates, who warned that the new rules in England have ‘opened the floodgates to a whole host of dubious sex education “providers” and that some schools are using ‘material that is deeply inappropriate and sexually extreme’ (Cates 2022).

Few of Miriam Cates’s Parliamentary colleagues appear to share her fears, for there was overwhelming support in the House of Commons (i.e., a majority of over 500 MPs) for the Government’s proposed reform of relationships and sex education (UK Parliament 2019). Following their enactment by Parliament, these new legal requirements, delayed for a short while by the COVID-19 pandemic, came into force in the summer of 2021. Consequently, today in England, all primary schools are required to teach Relationships Education and all secondary schools must teach Relationships and Sex Education (DfE 2021a).

This article explores these changes from the perspective of a small group of teachers and educational professionals in the East Midlands region of England. But first, a brief comment on our use of terminology. When we refer to Relationships and Sex Education as a subject taught in secondary schools, capital letters or the acronym RSE will be used, whereas lower case will be employed to describe relationships and sex education in more general terms. Likewise, when reference is made to Relationships Education as a subject specifically taught in primary schools, capital letters will be used, whilst lower case will be utilised to describe relationships education more generally. Finally, when discussing Relationships Education, we avoid the acronym RE to avoid confusion with Religious Education.

Relationships education and RSE lessons – the new rules

The seeds of reform were sown in 2017 when Justine Greening, then Secretary of State for Education, announced that ‘Relationships and Sex Education’ (RSE) – as opposed to what had previously been termed ‘Sex and Relationships Education’ – would be put on a ‘statutory footing’ (Greening 2017). Ms Greening explained that change was necessary because the official guidance at the time on Sex and Relationships Education had become ‘increasingly outdated’ (Greening 2017). Ms Greening’s announcement was supplemented by a Government Policy Statement, which stipulated that educators should focus more on relationships, and that lessons should include issues such as different types of relationships and how relationships may affect health and wellbeing (DfE 2017).

The Government’s plans on relationships and sex education were then presented to and accepted by Parliament, leading to the enactment of section 34 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017. It stipulated that power was to be delegated to the Secretary of State for Education, who was thereby enabled by way of regulations (i.e., secondary legislation) to make provision for:

- (a) relationships education to be provided to pupils of compulsory school age receiving primary education at schools in England; [and]
- (b) relationships and sex education to be provided (instead of sex education) to pupils receiving secondary education at schools in England.

Accordingly, two years later, the Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education and Health Education (England) Regulations 2019 (SI No. 924) were introduced. The 2019

Regulations provide for Relationships Education in primary schools, and RSE in secondary schools. These subjects must now be taught in all maintained schools, academies, and independent schools, as well as in a range of other places of learning (e.g., pupil referral units, maintained special schools, special academies, and non-maintained special schools). Additionally, whilst sex education is not compulsory in primary schools, if a maintained primary school chooses to teach it and goes beyond what is covered in the national curriculum for science, it must make this clear in its policy and consult with parents on what is to be covered (DfE 2021b). In view of the need to update the previous Guidance (DfEE 2000), the Government in 2019 published new guidelines on the teaching of Relationships Education and RSE (DfE 2019). The 2019 Guidance – informative and advisory in tone as opposed to being legally binding per se – sets out what schools must do to comply with their legal obligations when teaching about relationships and sex. For example, it provides that every school must have a written policy for the teaching of Relationships Education (primary) and RSE (secondary) – and that schools should consult with parents to ‘ensure that the policy meets the needs of pupils and parents and reflects the community they serve’ (DfE 2019, para 13).

Research aims

The aim of this research is to explore some of the challenges and opportunities arising from the recently introduced rules on Relationships Education and RSE in England. The perspectives of teachers/educational professionals lie at the heart of this research. Their insights, especially in terms of what is happening in schools, are valuable for three reasons. First, they can help to ensure that teachers receive appropriate support when implementing the new rules governing lessons on relationships and sex. Second, the perspectives of teachers/educational professionals offer useful guidance to law and policy makers. Third, the insights of teachers can help provide a springboard for the establishment of more informed discussions with other key stakeholders in the field.

Methods

To address the aims of the research, an exploratory approach was adopted to capture the experiences and perspectives of teachers in schools. The approach adopted was informed by a macro-social-constructionist theoretical framework. This epistemological position recognises that meaning-making and sense-making of a particular issue are best understood from the perspectives of those in that world, while further acknowledging the wider socio-political sphere of influence on how research participants present that meaning.

Recruitment and data collection

Aligned with our qualitative design, we recruited a convenience sample of educators in primary and secondary schools in the East Midlands from a conference we had previously organised. In total eight primary school teachers, two primary deputy headteachers, two primary headteachers, one secondary headteacher and three secondary school leaders participated (N = 16). All participants worked in state/publicly funded schools, covering both urban and rural areas, with a wide-ranging and diverse pupil demographic.

Data were collected using focus groups. Whilst scholars debate the value of focus groups as an effective research tool (Acocella 2012) an obvious strength is that they allow participants to share ideas, question others and discuss the wider issues at stake (Willig 2008). Specifically, focus groups are a valuable method of data collection for research in the field of education (Lederman 1990) and, given the highly sensitive nature of discussions about relationships and sex, such groups are ideal ‘for gaining information and listening to people’s views in a non-threatening environment’ (Litosseliti 2003, 9).

Three focus groups were conducted face-to-face in March 2020 and were audio-recorded onto an encrypted device and transcribed verbatim. These were conducted by the three female authors (SA, MO, KO), who all have experience in their career history working in schools in some capacity, working and researching with children, as well as engaging educational practitioners in dialogue about important issues. This experience and knowledge functioned to facilitate the flow of conversation in the focus groups, helped to build alignment with participants, and encouraged a more participant driven discussion.

A semi-structured approach to the focus groups was employed. A basic guide for moderators was used to ensure group discussions aligned with the overarching research agenda, but provided sufficient opportunity for participants to lead discussion and drive topics of interest. Thus, the guide focused on three areas of interest: 1) teachers’ perceptions of relationships and sex education; 2) their views on the importance of relationships and sex education; and 3) the challenges of providing relationships and sex education. While the guide helped maintain a focus on the research topic, it was applied flexibly to promote participant driven discussions and provide space for insightful areas of dialogue to be followed.

Analytical approach

Congruent with a macro-social-constructionist stance, data were analysed using reflexive organic thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019). This approach harnessed sense-making from the participants, with all four researchers familiarising themselves with the data to seek meaning from the perspectives of participants. Thus, the authors engaged in data collection and the Project Lead (PC) worked carefully together with a team approach to undertake the coding process and collaboratively worked through discussions agreeing the final identification of overarching themes: challenges, opportunities, LGBTQ+, and parents.

In identifying these themes, we undertook a series of coding of each focus group to create coding frameworks, using the specific procedures and reflexive discussion processes as advocated by Braun and Clarke (2022). In practice, this involved familiarisation with the data by all authors, discussion in labelling codes and clustering them into themes, and some level of description and interpretation of the wider issues identified by participants. The interdisciplinarity of the team, the educational experiences of the data collectors, and the different epistemic foci of the four members provided for rich and in-depth discussions of the data, as well as anchoring the themes and participant narratives to wider evidence, knowledge, and team expertise.

Ethics

Ethical governance in relation to the project was provided by the University of Leicester's Research Ethics Committee. Informed written consent was provided by all the educational professionals in the focus groups. To differentiate between them, and retain anonymity, each participant was allocated a number. This is represented below with a capital 'P', alongside their individual contributions.

Findings

When we undertook the research, the new rules on relationships and sex education had yet to come into force, but several of the schools represented by focus group participants were early adopters, having already made the relevant changes. In anticipation of the formal introduction of the new rules on Relationships Education and RSE – taught within the parameters of PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic education) (DfE 2021d) – participants identified several challenges and opportunities, which will now be explored.

Challenges

Prior to the formal introduction of the new rules on Relationships Education and RSE, fears had been expressed that their implementation would create 'serious challenges' for teachers/educational professionals (Calvert 2020). Some participants agreed, and an issue of concern – raised in earlier studies in the field more generally (Allred, David, and Smith 2003, 86) – was that teachers might struggle to comply with the new rules given the constraints of time:

... something that I've found is that there's just not enough time, 20 minutes a day for maybe a week and then you move onto another topic. And I don't feel that we have enough time to embed this information. P14

... we only get 20 hours over the course of the year, which isn't much time. P13

I have to say that you've got that short amount of time. And then on top of that we do other things. P16

A second 'challenge' was that of ensuring consistency between different teachers charged with taking classes on Relationships Education and RSE:

we've now got 25 tutors teaching it and when you've got so many people teaching it, how do you then make sure everyone's doing the right thing? That's the issue, we're all coming from different backgrounds, we've all had different experiences. P15

differences within the school ... could be problematic ... if you've got a two-form entry, say, one teacher's saying one thing, one's saying another. And there's not a similar message ... I'm not saying we have to be robots ... [but] there needs to be some sort of continuity. P6

It is perhaps ironic that when Justine Greening first announced the Government's plans to reform the teaching of relationships and sex education, she stressed the importance of ensuring that 'every child had access to age-appropriate provision, in a *consistent* (our emphasis) way' (Greening 2017). But the problem of inconsistency in delivering lessons in this area, which has been identified by scholars elsewhere (Hulme Chambers et al. 2017),

seems unlikely to go away. Moreover, the risk of an inconsistent approach in schools was, in the opinion of one discussant in the focus groups, increased if teachers felt uncomfortable in class:

And you're going to get different answers from teachers who feel quite comfortable about it versus some members of staff that just feel really uncomfortable and really embarrassed as well. P11

Accordingly, a third and final 'challenge' identified by participants was the need to ensure that teachers received appropriate training, thereby enabling them to feel both confident and comfortable when discussing relationships and sex in the classroom. Yet in England the education offered to teachers in this regard has been recently described as 'limited' (Sell and Reiss 2022, 53), whilst scholars have established a clear link between a teacher's confidence (or lack thereof) and their ability to provide effective relationships and sex education lessons (Walker et al. 2021; McNamara, Geary, and Jourdan 2011). Certainly, in this research the significance of a teacher's confidence was an important consideration, being highlighted in the following terms:

I think the key thing there is that you want all of your staff to be able to confidently answer questions because that it itself will give your parents and the wider community confidence in the messages that you're delivering. P1

The importance of an educator's comfort when communicating about sexual health has been well documented (Greenan 2019). Likewise, many participants emphasised the importance of teachers feeling comfortable, when implementing the recently introduced rules on Relationships Education and RSE:

Making sure that all the teachers have the knowledge ... [is] something we're working on in our school, making sure that the teachers do feel comfortable with it and know what it is that they're teaching. P3

I want the staff who ... have to deliver that curriculum to feel comfortable. P16

And if the staff feel uncomfortable then the parents are going to feel uncomfortable [and] the children are going to feel uncomfortable. P9

In this regard, attention was drawn to the value of the teacher having appropriate experience and subject knowledge:

I'm a science specialist anyway. So, for me going in and teaching about, you know, sex, isn't really a big deal because I've always done it my career, just more scientifically. Whereas I can totally understand for a young, newly qualified teacher who maybe is doing a subject where they don't do any kind of the health aspects, going in and teaching a bunch of 16-year-olds about STIs, it could be very, very daunting. P13.

... the most successful lessons, surely, are the ones that a teacher feels that they've got the strongest subject knowledge. P12

Similar concerns about teachers not having appropriate training were expressed in Parliament when the proposed reforms were being debated (Moran 2019, col 44). However, the (now former) Education Secretary, Damian Hinds, promised to 'make sure that good training is in place' (Hinds 2019, col.44), and one way of measuring the veracity of these words would be for there to be more research projects aimed at eliciting the

views of those teachers/educational professionals who educate schoolchildren about relationships and sex.

Of the three aforementioned ‘challenges’, it is significant that they all related to practical concerns – whereas the principles underpinning the recent reforms attracted their general support. Because of this, we now turn to the ‘opportunities’ identified by our discussants.

Opportunities

Participants in this study appeared to welcome (certainly in principle) the opportunities afforded by the recently introduced rules on relationships and sex. In this respect, three themes were identified.

The first of these was that schools, when teaching Relationships Education and RSE, must now take their obligations more seriously. Accordingly, for some participants, the recent reforms addressed previous concerns about lessons on sex and relationships (Best 1999) being marginalised in the curriculum or relegated to the end of the teaching day:

now it’s statutory, obviously it’s going to be taken a lot more seriously. . . . [And] now it’s being taken more seriously . . . people are being a bit more accountable for teaching it. P11

Moreover, it was felt that the new rules on relationships and sex would provide the timetable with greater clarity and structure:

. . . the structure and the content [of the timetable] . . . and the new way things have been produced [is something] that we definitely support [and] not just to have PSHE as something as overtime . . . towards the end of the day [because] we’ve got something to finish off and that sort of thing. P12

With relationships having been said to ‘impact a vast array of [life] outcomes’ and ‘accepted as a core social determinant of health and wellbeing’ (Janssens et al. 2020, 494), a second positive effect of the recent changes identified by our research was the clear and unambiguous recognition of the importance of relationships education. In this regard, it is worth bearing in mind how, in the past, sex education was effectively prioritised over relationships education. For example, two and a half decades ago, the main statutory provisions in this area (the Education Act 1996, ss.403–405) only referred to ‘sex education’. Indeed, even when schools were later required to provide sex and relationships education/SRE (DfEE 2000), the greater emphasis on ‘sex’ was still clear – prompting concerns around this time ‘that far too many young people – boys and girls – do not know what a good relationship looks like’ (Nandy 2013, col 255). Today, however, with secondary schools under a duty to provide both Relationships *and* Sex education, the latter should not dominate at the expense of the former. After all, the current Government Guidance states:

The aim of RSE is to give young people the information they need to help them develop healthy, nurturing relationships of all kinds, not just intimate relationships Alongside being taught about intimate relationships, pupils should also be taught about family relationships, friendships and other kinds of relationships that are an equally important part of becoming a successful and happy adult. (DfE 2021c).

Thus, the change of order – so that SRE (sex and relationships education) has been replaced with RSE (relationships and sex education) in secondary schools – is a symbolic demonstration of a new commitment to relationships education. As one participant, speaking approvingly of the change, put it:

I like the flip with relationships being at the forefront ... I've had to make it clear to staff as well as students, because you say RSE and all they hear is the sex bit in the middle. So, I really like that we're pushing that sense. P15

Likewise, there was recognition of the need to ensure that parents are also aware of the importance of relationships education in primary schools:

I suppose it's ... making sure that the parents understand that it's about relationships first. P5

A third positive effect of the recent changes to Relationships Education and RSE identified in our research has been the creation of fresh opportunities for the discussion of issues that previously were seldom (if ever) addressed. For example, commenting on the change whereby all primary schools must now teach Relationships Education, one primary school representative said:

I think it's very valuable ... [that] ... things that are covered in there are things that haven't been covered before. For example, same sex relationships and what healthy, committed relationships into adulthood look like. P8

A similar point was made about the new opportunities afforded secondary schools to cover, in more detail, different kinds of relationship (both good and bad), including:

... things about domestic violence, about sexual violence ... all of those sorts of things have been really important to me, in terms of having discussions. P16

Furthermore, perhaps mindful of a traditional reluctance on the part of some schools to cover LGBTQ+ matters (Abbott, Ellis, and Abbott 2015; Strange et al. 2006), some participants in this study welcomed the increased opportunities for classroom discussion of LGBTQ+ relationships:

I think it's a welcome change ... our students, having spoken to them, are encouraged by the belief that they'll be told more about issues such as the LGBT+ community. P14

I've asked a couple of friends of mine who are ... gay if I could have some photos from their wedding, so that when we do our lessons, it's not just random stock photos, these are actual real people that I know. P8

The issue of how England's schools should cover LGBTQ+ issues in the classroom has, in recent years, generated debate (Epps, Markowski, and Cleaver 2021) and controversy (Griffiths and Ramzan 2019). Thus, it is hardly surprising that in the focus groups there was discussion about how LGBTQ+ matters should be incorporated into lessons on Relationships Education and RSE – so it is to this that we now turn.

LGBTQ+ issues in relationships education and RSE

The new rules on Relationships Education and RSE in England aim to ensure 'that every child has the opportunity to learn about and to discuss the different types of relationship

there are in the world' (Hinds 2019, col 47). Thus, today in England, schools should address LGBTQ+ relationships in an age-appropriate context. Or, as the Department for Education's Guidance puts it, when schools 'consider it appropriate to teach their pupils about LGBT, they should ensure that this content is fully integrated into their programmes of study for this area of the curriculum rather than delivered as a standalone unit or lesson' (DfE 2019, para 37).

In this regard, the Guidance distinguishes between primary and secondary schools. In relation to the former, there is recognition of the fact that there are many different kinds of 'family', including 'LGBT parents', and that '[t]eaching about families requires sensitive and well-judged teaching based on knowledge of pupils and their circumstances.' (DfE 2019, para 59). Regarding the latter, the DfE Guidance states that 'Sexual orientation and gender identity should be explored at a timely point and in a clear, sensitive and respectful manner' and that there 'should be an equal opportunity to explore the features of stable and healthy same-sex relationships ... integrated appropriately into the RSE programme, rather than addressed separately or in only one lesson' (DfE 2019, para 37).

In our focus group discussions, three themes were identified in relation to how best to incorporate LGBTQ+ content into lessons on relationships and sex.

The first related to the use by teachers of appropriate terminology in the classroom – an issue that has been recognised by scholars elsewhere as being 'contentious' (Mason and Woolley 2019, 4). In this regard some participants acknowledged the difficulties of knowing which term(s) to use:

When we come to teaching about relationships ... I'm not sure of the correct way. Whether you would say heterosexual and homosexual, whether you would say gay or straight. P8

I don't know if saying gay or straight is fine or if it's not. P11

... you could come up with a policy that has ... a description of what the definitions and terminologies we use are [but] you're always going to get those unique questions you can't plan a policy for. P12

A second theme identified from the focus groups concerned how teachers should best answer questions in the classroom about LGBTQ+ relationships. In this context the issue of adolescents 'coming out' was seen by some as being especially challenging:

I've recently had quite a few conversations with students who are coming out to me as being either gay or being unsure. And I find it hard then to signpost them ... obviously we can't tell them, yes, I think you should tell your parents or no you definitely shouldn't tell ... Obviously you can't say any of that stuff ... we're not counsellors ... We're not medically trained obviously either. P14

Moreover, the task of answering pupils' questions and giving them information in such a way as not to incur the wrath of some parents, was highlighted:

I think teachers are so worried about putting our foot in it ... because the backlash from parents can be really enormous. ... Children ask such open questions as well ... it's great that they want to know everything and then you also need to know where your line is because, God forbid, like you cross it and you've said just the wrong thing and that goes home. ... you're protecting yourself as well. P11

This fear, of teaching about LGBTQ+ issues in a way that might create parental disquiet, was something that concerned many participants:

I know some people who are in homosexual marriages but how do I, without promoting it ... put it across ... without saying, oh it's a great thing. Because you're not supposed to be saying that. P10

We've got an LGBTQ+ society which is run by key stage five students, which is a really vibrant and active social platform for them, which is fantastic. However, I don't feel at liberty to advice younger students to go, because then I fear that I'm at risk of encouraging behaviour, which parents then may complain about. P14

When it goes into ... how to tackle issues such as LGBTQ and things like that, it's more of a how do I approach it without getting parents back up. P7

These comments could, on the one hand, be characterised as an illustration of a pragmatic, cautious approach, which is necessary for the preservation of professional impartiality in the classroom. Yet, on the other, they might possibly also suggest that the legacy of Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, the infamous law that prohibited 'the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship' (Lee 2019), still lingers in the minds of some teachers.

A third LGBTQ+ related theme was the challenge of dealing with religious parents who view non-heterosexual relationships in negative terms. Given that some faith groups are wary of sex education generally (Tabatabaie 2015) and lessons on LGBTQ+ matters in particular (Christian Institute 2020), it was always going to be likely that religious (and cultural) norms would be discussed:

... we've got quite a high proportion of very religious families ... so, I think we've got to tread very carefully with the same-sex marriage. P8

... we have a lot of new arrivals to England, literally on a weekly basis ... [Given the significance of] what could be a kind of a cultural norm in their country ... they then arrive here and we're telling them, no that's wrong, it's illegal ... It's a very thin line to tread ... in terms of making sure we have the community on side. P13

The DfE Guidance states that 'positive relationships between the school and local faith communities help to create a constructive context' (DfE 2019, para 19). A detailed example of an attempt to develop such ties was given by one participant.

I had quite an interesting debate with an Islamic scholar ... he wanted us to teach [Relationships Education and Religious Education] ... in parallel. So, if for example, a child from an Islamic background were to ask a question about same-sex relationships that not only could we give the factual, legally correct information, but we would also touch on what Islam teaches in relation to same-sex relationships. You can understand the reason why I wasn't going to go there ... it's interesting to have that debate because my view, and this is a personal view, is that you have to separate the two. ... And the reassurance that you can give is that we follow the agreed syllabus for religious education and aspects of those particular issues will be covered as part of the agreed syllabus. But I think if you begin to put that into the realms of RSE, you suddenly then become somebody who is imparting opinion as opposed to fact. P4

Moreover, the need for all parents (of faith or otherwise) to accept the need for pupils to learn about LGBTQ+ issues in contemporary Britain, was a message that some participants felt needed to be conveyed.

[LGBTQ+] people exist in our society and your children will be in contact with people that are gay or bisexual or any of the above ... [so] we are teaching you to be part of a multi-cultural, diverse society and we owe that to your children. So, it's just kind of teaching that to the parents. P11

I can't tell children what relationships they should be pursuing and what's right and what's wrong. My job is to ensure that they get contemporary, factual information that allows them stay safe in modern Britain. P4

Parents, relationships education and RSE

The Department for Education has stated that every school 'should work closely with parents when planning and delivering' Relationships Education and RSE (DfE 2019, para 41). But what if parents are unhappy and wish to withdraw their children from such lessons? In the case of Relationships Education there is no right of parental withdrawal in both primary and secondary schools (DfE 2019, para 50). By contrast, when it comes to Sex Education, different rules govern primary and secondary schools. In primary schools, 'Head teachers will automatically grant a request to withdraw a pupil from any sex education delivered ... other than as part of the science curriculum' (DfE 2019 para 49). However, in secondary schools, the rules are more complicated. Whilst the long-standing right of parents to request that their child be withdrawn from the sex education element of RSE has been retained, a new rule has recently been introduced. It provides that all pupils can choose to 'opt into' sex education three terms before their 16th birthday, which effectively means that once a child turns 15, they have a right (irrespective of parental opposition) to be in receipt of sex education (DfE 2019, para 47).

These new rules have been criticised in some quarters for diluting parents' rights (Offord 2019, col 46). However, the educational opportunities created by the fact that 15-year-olds, who might previously have been withdrawn from sex education classes by their parents, can now 'opt into' them on their own volition, was welcomed by one of our discussants:

I'm really pleased ... the rights around withdrawal is (sic) much firmer, I feel like we're going to be able to educate our students more, without them being able to be withdrawn. I especially like the fact they can opt themselves back in. It's just a case of how we can educate them that they can do that, without causing concern within the community that we're pushing them back in. P13

The task of informing parents of their right to remove their children from sex education lessons without drawing attention to, or possibly even exacerbating latent fears that some parents (or communities more generally) might have about sex education, is a challenge facing teachers, especially in secondary schools. Different strategies in this regard were explored by participants. The most common, was sending a letter home to parents informing them about the school's policy, and inviting them to discuss any concerns with teaching staff.

I sent letters out ... just to say these are the areas we're going to cover over the year ... instead of writing a slip on the bottom because I know our parents will go, oh a slip, I'm going to withdraw. I just said if you would like to come in and meet me, then please do. ... we had, um, no issues. P15

I've instigated a letter going home from our head ... just saying, just a heads up, this is taking place, you may wish to talk to your son or daughter about this and if you've got any queries, please contact me. P16

One participant however suggested that schools, rather than sending letters home to parents, might instead wish to explain their withdrawal policy in a publicly accessible document, accessible via, for example, the school's webpage:

I was advised ... because a lot of our parents do withdraw, rather than actually sending a letter saying you can, just write it in the policy ... and then direct the parents to the policy. And then ... which it apparently is fine to do, you don't have to write a separate letter. And then we're more likely to keep more of ours in. P13

However, this same participant added that in their school they supplemented the published policy by organising a coffee morning as a way of engaging with parents, and this approach was mentioned by others:

[the coffee morning] ... would 'hopefully give them [parents] a bit more confidence and as opposed to us saying, we're going to be using this, this and this and them not being able to see it for themselves'. P7

[the message to parents in hosting the coffee morning was] ... 'come and chat in small groups and share your ideas'. P9

Thus, the 'coffee morning' model sits neatly with the Department for Education's recommendation that one way of helping schools build good relationships with parents is 'by inviting parents into school to discuss what will be taught' (DfE 2019, para 43) in lessons about relationships and sex education. Such bridge-building events are especially important given the misperceptions of some parents. For example, regarding relationships classes, one participant observed that:

... some of our parents were asking about this notion of schools indoctrinating children into following certain, as they termed it, lifestyle choices. These are not lifestyle choices and I think it's really important that we establish that with our parents. P4

Likewise, the misconceptions of some parents about sex education lessons were demonstrated by this exchange between two participants:

I think they [parents] thought we were going to use very graphic videos in the teaching of sexual relationships. ... P13

So, they thought we were then going to show pornography. P15

Basically, yes. P13

In seeking to assuage the concerns of parents, three key principles became evident from our discussions. First, there is a need for transparency, so that the materials used in relationships and sex education lessons can be easily assessed by parents.

What I've done to be really transparent ... We have a five-year plan, so you can see the spiralled curriculum and it's all on our website. P13

Second, there is the value of listening and being sensitive to the views of parents:

I think as teaching staff it's important to be sensitive to parents' views and I think a lot of the resistance comes from parents because they feel like their beliefs are being questioned. So, it's about hearing them out and hearing from their perspective why they're concerned. P2

And third, there is the importance of promoting communal values in the classroom, such as (respectively) empathy, kindness and child safety:

I tried to paint a picture of trying to view puberty through the eyes of a child, through the eyes of a child who goes to a school that doesn't teach about puberty. And the fear and the shame and the worry and the anxiety that that child will go through, if that isn't taught. P4

And I think when you talk about ethos in schools, all the parents would agree that's a common thread, that kindness, that sort of the idea of being respectful ... a really key part of our consultation is sharing that with parents. P2

... fundamentally it all comes back to keeping them [children] safe, doesn't it? P1 What parent doesn't want that? P5

Conclusion

This study aimed to shine light on the recently introduced rules governing Relationships Education and RSE in England. It sought to do so from the perspectives of a group of educational professionals in the East Midlands, who participated in a series of focus group discussions. Discussants observed that the new rules present various challenges and opportunities to those on the educational 'front-line'. Many of the challenges, such as those relating to deficiencies in teachers' time, training and confidence, mirror those identified in earlier studies in this area (Walker et al. 2021; NEU/NSPCC 2019; Westwood and Mullan 2007). Yet, it was also felt that the additional focus on relationships education offered teachers fresh opportunities to discuss traditionally neglected topics, including what has been described elsewhere as 'homosexuality and the negotiation of relationships and sexual encounters' (Strange et al. 2006, 31).

Notably, our research appears to highlight a difference between the importance of the subject and the perceptions of those charged with teaching it. In relation to the former, there was agreement on the need to ensure that pupils receive appropriate guidance about sex and human relationships. This is a view evidently shared by those in Government (Hinds 2019, col 36), the Opposition (Rayner 2019, col 38), and most of the general population (Ibbetson 2020). Indeed, as one of our participants commented about school lessons on relationships and sex:

you don't get any resistance to any of this from anybody within school, any teaching staff, any adults in school. ... I'm sure it's the same case in most schools. Everybody understands how important this is ... P5

In contrast, there was much less positivity about the role and status afforded to those charged with delivering sex and relationships lessons. Many of the challenges identified echoed the concerns expressed by teachers elsewhere, about feeling unsupported and

under-resourced. (Westwood and Mullan 2007; McNamara, Geary, and Jourdan 2011). Indeed, the generally negative perception of some about the role of educators in this area was neatly summarised by one participant:

Nobody becomes a teacher to deliver RSE. It's kind of a by-product of the job that they do. P14

When introducing its new rules on relationships and sex education in England, the Government said little about teachers per se, other than promising that 'the right support' would be in place for schools (Hinds 2019, col 40). But, with estimates suggesting that the relevant funding amounts only to about £250 per school (Rayner 2019, col 38) and claims that the Government has only fulfilled half of its spending commitment (Galer 2022), concern about a lack of support for those charged with implementing these rules seems unlikely to fade away.

In the fullness of time, the main criterion for measuring the success of the recent changes to Relationships Education and RSE in England will (quite rightly) be the extent to which they transform the lives of children and young people. However, another measure of success will be if, from the perspectives of teachers, the opportunities associated with the new rules are viewed as significantly outweighing the challenges.

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