

Part 3

School Education: Policies, Innovations, Practices & Entrepreneurship

Gillian L. S. Hilton

Sex and Relationships Education in England – a Policy Causing Problems for Schools

Abstract

Sex and relationships education has been a controversial area of the curriculum in England for many years. Despite changes to the content and the approach to this material, many teachers and parents remained unhappy about issues such as: the right of schools to teach material that some think should be done in a family situation only; the problem of training teachers how to approach subjects that can be controversial; the right of parents to refuse to allow their children to take part in such lessons. Added to these is the subject division between the biological aspects, which were compulsory and the relationships area, which is so much needed to help young people consider their behaviour and attitudes to sex, sexual orientation and relationships of all kinds. Compounding these difficulties, is the need to teach within the parameter of ensuring that students learn about British values of equality, respect and the acceptance of different family configurations. This paper discusses the changes put into law in 2020, which have produced several further areas of contention, such as the inclusion of teaching about different sexualities and family structures, for example LGBT and same sex marriage, resulting in further controversy over withdrawal.

Keywords: sex and relationships education in England, LGBT, British values, Covid, statutory curriculum, controversy

Introduction

Teaching about sensitive subjects such as sexual relationships and sexual orientation in England has caused a great deal of controversy over the last few decades. The problem of dividing this material between science, where the differences between male and female bodies and reproduction are taught and relationships education (PSHE i.e. Personal, Social and Health Education, plus Economic Education if not dealt with in Citizenship Education), which deals with feelings, respect for others and the right to say no to sexual advances, had challenged teachers for years. In addition, the desire of some parents to see this area as their responsibility not education's, plus successive governments' refusals to make this a part of the statutory curriculum, has resulted in controversy, poor teaching, and the desire of many to avoid the material altogether.

In the last decades the country has been shocked at the exploitation of young white girls, who have been groomed by some ethnic males to offer sexual favours (under the age of consent) for ‘treats’ such as meals, drugs, gifts etc. This problem was slow to be acknowledged by those responsible for the welfare of children, such as Local Authorities and successive governments. This was due to sensitivity considerations, over singling out specific ethnic/religious groups and creating racial tensions, eventually, whole groups of men in several areas of the country have been imprisoned, but not before the lives of many young underage and vulnerable girls had been ruined. This resulted in feelings changing to the idea that knowledge was strength. So, successive governments made some attempts to change the curriculum. In 2019, Parliament finally approved a changed and now statutory curriculum. This was to be linked to British values of respect, inclusivity and understanding of consent. However, these proposals have not made this area of the curriculum cease to be controversial, or teachers sufficiently prepared to deliver this new statutory curriculum to students.

Controversy over the curriculum

Recent changes to the curriculum for Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSE) (note the renaming) have resulted in some serious protests to schools in England, particularly from Muslim parents in areas of the country with high Islamic populations. RSE has been an area of controversy for years, as some parents of disparate cultural groups, considered that these subjects were for parents to address, not education. Some also believed, that the material delivered should reflect their individual cultural or religious beliefs. This idea has clashed with more liberal thinking, for example, areas such as same sex marriage, cohabiting and diverse family groupings. Highly controversial ideas for some to accept. The biology of males and females, including the reproductive system, pregnancy and birth, was always compulsory learning in secondary science. In addition, most primary schools prepared pupils for puberty and discussed where babies come from. The relationships lessons were where parents could withdraw their children. However, children heard from peers what had been taught; not always an accurate rendition however (Hilton, 2007). These students became adept at avoiding taking home official school letters, on withdrawal of children from sex education covered in PSHE lessons. Most people in the teaching profession who were delivering PSHE lessons, deeply regretted this option of withdrawal, as it took the students away from the discussion of responsibility, choice and respect for partners.

The new curriculum

The last review of education about sexual matters was in 2000, so the subject was in need of updating to include changed attitudes to sexuality and to prepare students for life in the twenty first century (Baukham, 2021). The new curriculum for RSE was made compulsory from September 2020 (Gov.UK, 2019), providing schools were ready to meet statutory requirements. If not, summer 2021 was offered, to allow schools time to adjust their curriculum approach and to cope with the effects of the Pandemic. The RSE area remained unpopular with some parents and much press interest occurred with incorrect and intentional sensationalising of the

proposed content of lessons, spread by much of the media, who enjoyed creating controversy (Hallahan, 2020). This resulted in difficult meetings in many schools, where parents attended consultations on school sex education, possessing incorrect information, with which they challenged teachers. The Department for Education (DfE) has prepared a large number of documents to advise both primary and secondary schools of the requirements that have been set in place. These included a fifty-page document entitled *Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education*, with further materials related to guiding teachers, the statutory nature of the curriculum and particular booklets related to primary or secondary schools. Supporting these are annexes, detailing the regulations for delivery; resources available; cross government strategies for both relationships and sex education; the start time of the curriculum. In addition, the DfE has issued several guides for parents prepared in a variety of languages.

When the new curriculum was mooted, many experienced teachers campaigned to make the subject compulsory, as lack of knowledge they felt could, in some cases, lead to problems such as forced marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM). Both of these issues had aroused serious concern. Young girls were being taken back to home countries, and forced into early marriage, or suffered FGM operations. Also, some doctors in the UK were imprisoned for undertaking FGM illegal operations. Schools are expected to report any unusual journeys overseas and the government, using a multi-agency approach, provides material to deal with these concerns. The Home and Foreign and Commonwealth Offices, provide an advice line on procedures if a planned forced marriage is suspected (HM Government, 2020; GOV. UK, 2013 updated 2020a).

The campaign for compulsory RSE resulted in concern from some parents. The Secretary of State for Education therefore reluctantly allowed withdrawal from sex education in secondary schools relationships lessons, but not biological scientific information on sexual differences, pregnancy and birth covered in the science curriculum. No withdrawal is allowed from any other part of health or relationships education. Once the child is three school terms before the age sixteen and requests to attend all lesson on sexual relationships, withdrawal is not allowed. The DfE considers this information essential to healthy living (DfE, no date). In the primary area withdrawal is not allowed from lessons, which cover puberty and the changing body, as this is designated as part of the science and health curricula (The Schoolrun, 2021). This complicated approach has caused difficulties for headteachers and for parents attempting to understand what is taught when and where. To some extent it depends on each school's curriculum so teachers are still concerned about giving 'forbidden' information during a compulsory relationships lesson.

An inclusive approach

RSE has moved on since the 1988 controversy, where schools were instructed not to 'promote' homosexuality via a law called Section 28, part of the Local Government Act of 1988, which was not repealed until 2003 (Greenland & Nunney, 2008). Though what this 'promotion' entailed was totally unclear, teachers were concerned that any mention of sexual deviation, could result in their dismissal. Today, discussion of lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender (LGBT) relationships is

compulsory in secondary schools and children understand that legal marriages can take place between people of opposite, or the same sex. This is part of the new guidelines aimed at inclusivity and a more equal appreciation of different relationships: friendships, workplace relationships, or marriage. The intention, is to help young people understand human sexuality in all its forms and to develop respect for themselves and others, whatever their sexual orientation. The curriculum includes online safety and problems of grooming, methods of contraception and the understanding of consent in all sexual relationships. The aim is to keep young people safe, but also happy and in good health. However, such discussions are still causing controversy, despite the delight of the LGBT community at being treated as 'normal', in relation to love and sexual orientation. These changes were supported by the vast majority of Members of Parliament and welcomed by Stonewall the LGBTQ Charity, who immediately offered to help teachers in preparing sensitive lesson material. In primary schools discussion of families and friendships should occur, including families which vary, such as step-families and ones where there are two mothers or two fathers.

All schools must produce a written policy for relationships education or RSE and also for health education. In addition, schools have to consult parents whilst preparing that policy and ensure it meets the needs of pupils and is appropriate to the local community. Policies should be on the school website, free copies available and school governors consulted (DfE, 2019). However, enormous problems remain for those writing policies and delivering lessons, as guidance related to Key Stages and ages of schooling is not inserted.

Links to British values

This recent controversy became, in Muslim areas of Birmingham, centred on the combination of teaching British Values, an essential part of the National Curriculum for all schools and the right of parents to decide what should be included in RSE and who should teach it. Problems arose over one primary school's curriculum designed to teach children British Values, related to the aims of the 2010 Equality Act, including respect for sexual diversity, varieties of sexual orientation and different family structures. It aimed to help children to be proud of their own backgrounds, but to celebrate and recognise difference and diversity and prepare them for life in modern Britain (BBC News, 2019). The health education curriculum also covers healthy eating, having sufficient sleep, cutting time spent online, relationships and during secondary school, sex education is added to the list. Most primary schools have for years though, prepared their pupils for puberty and discussed areas such as pregnancy and where babies come from.

Training teachers

According to Discovery Education (2020), sixty five percent of teachers who responded to a survey on their confidence in delivering the new RSE, responded negatively, little different to previous findings. Teachers in primary and form teachers (those who have the responsibility for a particular group of students as well as teaching a specialist subject) in secondary, have often been expected to teach the relationships area of PSHE, with more or less no training (Hilton, 2009). Many

campaigns have been run and some efforts made by various governments have been tried, to train some specialist teachers. However, controversy rages when non-maths graduates teach that subject, rather than maths specialist teachers. Teachers with little or no preparation can however teach about relationships, including sexual orientation, without any questions asked. This subject has been viewed by many as a disaster area in the curriculum, with the subject often being badly taught in at least one third of schools. Press reports in 2013, showed Ofsted's annual report being highly critical of the teaching about sex in schools. These criticisms included; in primary, avoiding discussing puberty and over concentration on friendships. Whereas, in secondary Ofsted reported too much emphasis on the mechanics of sex and not enough about relationships, consent and preparation for sexual experiences (Long, 2020).

The Sex Education Forum in 2018 also surveyed RSE teachers, to see if they felt adequately trained (Hazell, 2018). One fifth of respondents, had received no training whatsoever, access to training was considered inadequate and they felt insecure about teaching the subject. Thirty nine percent considered the training received, was not good enough. Generally, this teaching is only a small part of a teacher's role, most spending their time concentrating on other subjects. To become a specialist in the area is very difficult to achieve. There were concerns about teaching areas such as contraception, pregnancy and the options available if the pregnancy was unwanted. Also, sexually transmitted infections and accessing sexual health services and guidance on responding to sexual content online, challenges many teachers. These areas are now compulsory from 2020, with twenty one percent of respondents not confident teaching about LGBT issues and making the subject inclusive. Even more controversial, is the idea of discussing with teenagers sexual enjoyment, satisfaction and the idea of consensual sex.

Improving sex education teaching

This catalogue of problems, plus the controversy of withdrawal from some lessons and other parental concerns, does not bode well for the new curriculum. For years English teachers and training providers, (often charities such as the Sex Education Forum and Children's Bureau), have advised an examination of the approach and delivery in Dutch schools. Lewis and Knijn (2001) comparing the two countries, suggested that in England the emphasis was on dangers and prevention of situations such as unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. However, the Dutch present sexual relationships as a normal part of life, to be entered into with knowledge and little political controversy occurs. Teenage pregnancy numbers in the Netherlands are low; from age four all children have age-appropriate sexuality education, which is designed to build understanding of one's own and others sexuality (Avery, 2019). In England the need to halt a rising tide of unwanted teen pregnancies in the late nineties and early twenty first century, helped some attitude change across the country. However, the need for relaxed, confident teachers so desired by students, especially boys, has not as yet been catered for. Boys, dread teachers' embarrassment needing staff who understand their innate need to pretend, that they know all about sex and do not require much instruction (Hilton, 2007). To provide excellent RSE, either we need specifically trained teachers, or at least much more continuing professional development for serving teachers.

Certainly, this is not a subject area that anyone should be forced to teach. It is good to have familiar teachers to deliver this subject, with some possible experts who add weight of information and support school staff, as most students say they are happier with teachers they know, when discussing sensitive information (Hilton, 2007).

Realising the problems that inexperienced staff have with teaching this area of the curriculum, the government has finally made wider attempts to offer training on how to teach in this area in *Guidance, teaching about relationships, sex and health* (GOV.UK, 2020b). This sets out the training modules available for teachers with the intention of increasing knowledge. These include preparing policies, teaching materials and lesson plans for subject leaders, linked to the statutory guidance. Certain schools are designated as Teaching Schools, to advise and support other area schools with training activities. This, to some extent, is reaching more people than previous initiatives, but does little to acknowledge that some teachers are not suitable for delivering this material, due to embarrassment, religious beliefs or other concerns that prevent them being confident, relaxed and able to approach difficult material easily.

HMI Pownall (2021) Ofsted subject leader for PSHE, points to the need for clear agreed goals in curriculum design for RSE, an avoidance of being influenced by passing trends and that all teaching staff have a joint understanding of the subject goals. There is need for a united intent from staff, on what needs to be taught and how the different elements of the subject come together to complete the whole curriculum. He acknowledges that the government supplied curriculum is not related to specific ages, or Key Stages in learning, but is left to the discretion of the schools and the subject leader, which can be difficult for curriculum planning. In addition, work has to be planned with whole school agreement across subject boundaries in PSHE and Biology. Ofsted expect that during inspections, they will see that learned knowledge in these areas impacts on pupil behaviour in school.

Conclusion

If young people in England are to have a good grounding in RSE from primary school onwards, it is essential that the problems with the teaching and learning in this area are worked on and overcome. Preferably, it would be better to have this curriculum area offered as a specialism by teacher education departments, possibly twinned with another subject in order to ensure that knowledgeable, confident teachers deliver this material. The present system of leaving this controversial and sensitive material to reluctant form teachers, not trained in this area, is not the way to proceed. Ofsted's new remit to base inspections on the curriculum, not exam results, should encourage a change of approach. In addition, having specially trained teachers to work in this area, would allow students to develop trust. Such an important area of education for young people, deserves honesty, good information and above all knowledgeable, relaxed, confident teachers who can demonstrate empathy, be happy to admit to the funny side of talking about such matters and above all, lack any appearance of embarrassment, as this is anathema to their students.

References

- Avery, L. (2019): Sex education in the Netherlands. *Dutch Review*, <https://dutchreview.com/expat/education/sex-education-in-the-netherlands/> (Accessed 29.12.2020).
- Baukham, I. (2021): Implementing compulsory RSE, priority content areas for 2020-21, and managing the impact of COVID-19 on delivery. Westminster Forum Policy Conference *Compulsory Relationships and Sex Education* (13.01.2021).
- BBC News (2019): Parents protest over Birmingham school's LGBT equality teaching. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/ukengland-birmingham-47040451> (Accessed 27.09.2020).
- DfE (no date): *Understanding Relationships, Sex and Health Education at your child's secondary school: a guide for parents*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/907640/RSE_secondary_schools_guide_for_parents.pdf (Accessed 29.10.2020).
- DfE (2019): *Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education*. London: DfE, Crown Copyright.
- Discovery Education (2020): Introducing the New RSE Curriculum. <https://www.discoveryeducation.co.uk/what-we-offer/discovery-education-health-and-relationships/curriculum/introducing-the-new-RSE-curriculum-in-schools> (Accessed 22.09.2020).
- GOV.UK (2019): *Guidance Relationships and Sex education (RSE) and Health Education*. London: DfE, Crown Copyright. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education> (Accessed 27.09.2020).
- GOV.UK (2013 updated 2020a): *Guidance forced marriage*. London: Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Foreign Commonwealth Development Office, Crown Copyright. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/forced-marriage> (Accessed 19.11.2020).
- GOV.UK (2020b): *Teaching about relationships, sex and health*. London: DfE, Crown Copyright. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/teaching-about-relationships-sex-and-health> (Accessed 15.11.2020).
- Greenland, K. & Nunney, R. (2008): The repeal of Section 28: it ain't over 'til it's over'. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 26(4), 243-251.
- Hallahan, G. (2020): Don't get caught in the parent trap. In: TES (Eds.) *A Guide to Delivering the Relationships, Sex and Health Curriculum*. London: TES.
- Hazell, W. (2018): Three in 10 teachers deliver RSE with no training. *TES*, 13th November.
- Hilton, G. L. S. (2007): Listening to the boys again: an exploration of what boys want to learn in sex education classes and how they want to be taught. *Sex Education Journal*, 7(2), 161-174.
- Hilton, G. (2009): Personal Social and Health Education. In: M. Cole (Ed.) *Equality in the Secondary School* (pp. 232-246). London: Continuum.
- HM Government (2020): *Multi-agency statutory guidance on female genital mutilation*. London: Crown Copyright.
- Lewis, J. & Knijn, T. (2001): A Comparison of English and Dutch Sex Education in the Classroom. *Education and Health*, 19(4), 59-64.
- Long, R. (2020): *Relationships and Sex Education in Schools (England)*. Briefing Paper 05102. London: House of Commons Library.

-
- Pownall, R. (2021): Recognising good provision of RSE within schools and the wider role of the new inspection framework. Westminster Forum Policy Conference *Compulsory Relationships and Sex Education* (13.01.2021).
- The Schoolrun (2021): Sex and Relationships Education: What your Child Learns. <https://www.theschoolrun.com/sex-and-relationships-education-what-your-child-learns> (Accessed 19.01.2021).

Dr. Gillian L. S. Hilton, Middlesex University, London, United Kingdom