

## **Faith-sensitive RSE in areas of low religious observance: Really?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

It is widely agreed that Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) needs to take account of cultural and religious considerations and this principle is reflected in current government advice in England. At the same time, and for a number of reasons, many of those who teach RSE in schools find it difficult to take account of religious considerations, for example because they are unsure how to handle the views of students when these are strongly influenced by religious values. In this article, we report on fieldwork undertaken with school students in England including in one school that was characterised by low religious observance. Our key finding troubles the notion that students who identify as agnostic or atheistic are unsympathetic to religious considerations. We found that the large majority of students for whom religion was not personally important nevertheless saw great value in what we term 'faith-sensitive RSE'. This has implications for how RSE might be taught in schools where there is a diversity of students in regards to the importance they attach to religion.

**KEYWORDS:** Faith-sensitive RSE, RSE, Religion, Student voice

## Introduction

Relationships Education and Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in England were given new statutory guidance in September 2019, for implementation in September 2020 (DfE 2019). The guidance states that all primary schools must teach Relationships Education, that all secondary schools must teach RSE and that all state-funded schools must teach Health Education. Primary schools may also choose to teach sex education, e.g. how a baby is conceived and born.

It is difficult to provide a succinct summary of the relationship between the terms 'Relationships Education', 'RSE' and 'Health Education' in English schools. Indeed, the latest statutory guidance specifically requires primary schools to define 'Relationships Education' and secondary schools to define 'Relationships and Sex Education' (DfE 2019, 11). In reality, though, these terms are understood as they are more generally: Relationships Education is seen as omitting specific issues to do with sexual behaviour including sexual intercourse and Health Education is seen as including topics like drugs education, nutrition education, exercise and mental wellbeing.

This article arises from a doctoral thesis undertaken by the first author to explore student views about how RSE can be taught in ways that take account of students who have a religious faith (Sell 2019). The stimulus was the experience of the first author during the course of her professional work as an RSE consultant, seeing the consequences of religious parents removing their children from RSE. Fieldwork was carried out with three schools in areas of high religious observance and one school in an area of low religious observance, as determined by reference to the most recent (2011) census (ONS 2012). In this article, we contrast findings from the school in an area of low religious observance with findings from the other three schools.

## Motivation for the study

There is a paucity of literature that explores positively the intersection of religion and RSE (Rasmussen 2010; O'Sullivan et al. 2019), with much of it being framed within a discourse of conflict. Hall et al. (2017) note that for more than four decades, sex education has been a contentious public health and policy issue in the USA. In a Canadian study, Young (2017) examined the debate over sex education in Ontario through the lenses of women, rights and religion and concluded that better ways needed to be found to interrogate religion in the public sphere than by simply accepting or condemning its presence. In the UK, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education has called for more religious literacy in schools, public life and the media (APPG on Religious Education 2016). Before the introduction of RSE, the term Sex and Relationship (SRE) guidance was used in England by the Department for Education and the long-lasting SRE guidance (DfE 2000, 12) advised: 'It is therefore important for [SRE] policies to be both culturally appropriate and inclusive of all children'. In their book *Faith, Values and Sex & Relationships Education*, Blake and Katrak (2002, 8) maintain that:

Religious doctrines can be viewed as a means to a spiritual goal, rather than merely a restriction on what is and is not acceptable. Moral codes of conduct are derived from religious teachings. On a spiritual level, following these codes can provide members

of a religion with rules to live by, and consequently, can result in a profound sense of liberation. This is often unrecognised in SRE.

Yet there is very little education and training available for teachers in this area. This is despite the fact that government agencies (DfE 2019) make it clear that the background, including religious background, of students ought to be considered when delivering RSE in schools. In the authors' experience after many years of working in England in this area, respectfully responding to students' views in a way that takes account of their faith is seldom evident in RSE unless the school is itself a faith school. Furthermore, teacher education about RSE in England remains limited (Robertson 2017) and incorporating faith sensitivity into teacher education, both initial and on-going, seems, in the authors' experience, to be rare. This is partly because RSE is not a compulsory part of the initial teacher education curriculum.

The 2019 government guidance on the teaching of RSE in schools in England states:

It must be taught sensitively and inclusively, with respect to the backgrounds and beliefs of pupils and parents while always with the aim of providing pupils with the knowledge they need of the law. (DfE 2019, 4)

The words 'sensitively' and 'inclusively' are hard to translate consistently into action. What is sensitive to one person can be insensitive to another, but one thing seems clear: if a student's background and beliefs need to be regarded, then faith sensitivity in RSE is needed. Simply talking about faith in RSE does not make it high quality. Faith sensitivity is by no means the only important issue concerning RSE, but it is an issue that is often shied away from or glossed over by academics and practitioners alike.

### ***Mohammed's and Joy's stories***

Two incidents (one a classroom incident which resulted in an external RSE facilitator being suspended from their job for a number of weeks and one from an interview undertaken by the same facilitator) crystallise the rationale behind the study.

Mohammed (all names used in this article are pseudonyms) found himself in a Year 10 classroom with other 14-15-year-olds and an external facilitator. The boys in the class were informed that they should always carry a condom with them, so that when they decided to have sex, they could have safer sex. Mohammed put up his hand and said that he did not want to do that. He was asked why and replied that he didn't intend to have sex until he was married so didn't need to carry a condom. The facilitator replied 'Really?' and then laughed at him, at which point the rest of the class joined in.

Joy had come to England to stay with her aunt. The aunt was very religious and removed her niece from RSE at school (as is permitted under the law). Joy had gone looking for love and ended up pregnant, having had unpleasant sex, only once, with a boyfriend who had since left her to go back to a previous girlfriend. Joy had not taken part in the relationship lessons that might have helped her make different relationship choices. She had not received the sexual health lessons that might have equipped her to understand the importance of contraception, or the possibility of taking emergency contraception. When

her boyfriend said he had not 'pulled out', but 'come' inside her, Joy thought a shower would solve the problem.

Here lies one of the conundra that sex educators face. How do we decide what should be included in an RSE curriculum to protect, inform and empower the Joys in classrooms whilst showing the Mohammeds the respect they deserve? How can we produce lessons that will give confidence to parents and carers like Joy's aunt that the values espoused in the family will also be respected in the classroom?

It is argued here that there does not have to be a clash between faith-sensitive RSE and comprehensive sex education and that faith-sensitive RSE may not only be desired by students of faith but by other students too. The journey towards evidence-based, comprehensive and faith-sensitive RSE is a tough but incredibly important one. It is essential that young people of faith and no faith have as much influence on their school RSE experience as possible. They need to be informed and empowered to make healthy and wise choices that are 'right' for themselves, choices that they will be proud of and not regret. They need the capability to say 'no' as well as 'yes' and 'maybe later, let's discuss it', so that they do not have the experiences that Mohammed and Joy had.

## **Methods**

### ***Methodological stance***

The study employed a constructivist grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1997; Charmaz 2014) and its methodological design was built up level by level, in line with grounded theory. Grounded theory was chosen because there was a desire to start at grass roots level and work upwards. Student voices were used to build theory from their ideas, life experiences and understandings, rather than starting with an initial theory and endeavouring to prove or disprove it by analysis of the data.

The research employs a mostly constructivist (Piaget 1954) methodology and epistemology, using an applied and mixed methods approach. Constructivism was appropriate as it presumes that reality (what is perceived and seen as important) is determined (constructed) by each of us in our own ways rather than being universally consistent. Where quantitative data are being viewed and analysed, graphs and percentages are used to demonstrate the opinions of large numbers of students. However, the reasons for these opinions are expressed more effectively through the qualitative data. The study reflects a pragmatist viewpoint (Dewey 1909), in which individuals do not passively observe the world but are situated and participate within it, and is viewed through a practitioner's lens.

When discussing and researching issues involving the lives, values and beliefs of young people in school it is important to realise that every student's experiences and values are in some way, 'constructed' (Vygotsky 1934; Kincheloe 2005) by the young person themselves influenced where and how they are situated. In other words, lives are built (developed) from a myriad of experiences and influences, including background, environment and beliefs and values. This means that the study is heavily skewed, out of necessity, towards an interpretivist (Orlikowski and Baroudi 1991) approach. Even quantitative data manifest an element of interpretation; for example, a certain percentage of people adopt a Muslim label for themselves, but it is likely that there will be a range of understandings of what it is to be a Muslim (Modood 2003).

A constructivist grounded theory approach was adopted because of the need for the voices of students to be heard. At each stage of analysis, the qualitative data were open-coded and then the codes were put into groups which fed into axial codes, whilst memos were written during the analysis to inform future analysis and identify themes.

The lens through which the research was viewed is that of a practitioner (McKernan 2005). The motivation, methodology, data and findings are viewed through this lens to help produce outcomes that benefit the quality and scope of RSE in the future. This practitioner's lens is used to give value to the individuals involved in the research, offering students a voice. It enabled, once all the data had been collected and analysed, the use of the findings to produce guidance for those working in the field of RSE.

The initial elements were developed with the needs of the study and students in mind. The research methods, questionnaire content and scenarios were explicitly devised in partnership with the students involved in semi-structured focus groups during the first round of data gathering and form the basis of the research, in line with grounded theory, giving those young people the role of co-researchers.

Whilst drawing on grounded theory, this work is also based on years of the authors' experience and a body of literature (including Lee 1988; Reiss and Mabud, 1998; Blake and Frances 2001; Blake and Katrak 2002; Ofsted 2002; Halstead and Reiss 2003; Halstead and Waite 2003; Riches and Wells 2004; Yip et al. 2011). This, although seldom a total 'fit' for the research, informed its development, gave basis to it and helped situate the study. The initial findings from the semi-structured focus groups formed the foundation for, gave direction to and helped form the approach and methods used for the study. In this article we examine the views of a diversity of secondary students in England, with respect to their faith, religion or belief system, about whether RSE should take these into account.

## ***Data collection***

### *Semi-structured focus groups*

Six semi-structured focus groups, each with six students, were conducted with students in three inner-city schools in England – one girls' maintained school, one boys' faith-based voluntary aided school and one mixed-sex maintained school – each in an area of high religious observance. The initial choice of a fourth school, a rural school, withdrew and was replaced later, by another rural school in England, after the initial stage of instrument development. Data from all four schools are used in this article.

The six focus groups produced the initial data that shaped and directed the construction of the meaning of 'faith-sensitive RSE'; they were also asked what methods they felt would be most appropriate. In discussion, members of these initial groups said they thought that questionnaires, interviews and workshops would be useful tools to explore the subject in more depth with other students. Students in the groups were in year 10 and were studying for GCSE sociology as this provided the best 'payback' for the students and the school, since students needed to learn about research methods as part of their course of study. It was thought by us that being part of a research project would help them in their sociology lessons; it also meant that they had a knowledge of research methods, helping their input into the study to be informed.

The students in the focus groups provided a list of almost 60 different questions they felt could be included in a questionnaire used in the next stage of data collection. Many of

these were developed and incorporated into the instrument subsequently developed. Others informed the development of complementary data collection methods.

### *Questionnaires*

The questionnaires consisted of closed and open-ended questions, provided quantitative data that could be analysed statistically alongside more in-depth qualitative data. Pilot sessions with draft questionnaires were held in all three inner-city schools. Changes were made in line with the difficulties encountered and suggestions received from students during these sessions. The final version is provided in supplemental online Appendix 1 to this article.

Three classes in each of the four schools involved in the study later completed the questionnaires under quasi-examination conditions, to ensure each student's voice was heard without the chance of discussion leading to homogenisation of responses. Between 70-80 questionnaires were collected from each school, with a total of 291 returns across the four schools. Before the questionnaires were distributed, an explanation of atheism and agnosticism was given. The explanation was provided so that those who were rather unsure of what words to use about their beliefs or how they viewed religion had some ideas of what they could put on the form. This was especially important in the fourth school, which was in an area where there were significantly lower levels of religious observance.

### *Workshops*

Workshops were another form of data gathering suggested by the focus groups. They took the form of one-hour scenario discussion sessions and took place in one class in each of the four participating schools. Each student was given a set of scenarios (supplemental online Appendix 2). Student views and advice to the young people involved in the scenarios was requested, initially on a simple form, given to all students. Each class was then split into groups, in which students showing a similar level of religious observance as identified on a 'religious importance scale' (supplemental online Appendix 3) were placed together. The groups then carried out the activity a second time, but now students had to come to a consensus within their groups. The workshops helped to determine if and how religious views affect the way participants understood the situations, saw the problems and worked through the issues.

### *One-to-one interviews*

One-to-one interviews followed the questionnaires and workshops and served to expand, explain and clarify the findings in the questionnaires. Twenty five students (six to seven in each school) were selected for these interviews, based on their questionnaire answers and willingness to participate. The goal was to recruit a diversity of students. Students were more likely to be invited if they showed sensitivity to issues of faith, manifested some negative views towards religion or described a conflict between what their family taught at home and what they learned at school or through the media. These interviews provided rich data and helped shed light on the findings revealed by the questionnaires. They were audio-recorded verbatim and transcribed.

### ***Ethics***

Research ethics approval was granted by the Institute of Education, University of London. Senior management in the four schools agreed to allow the research take place within their schools. Students provided written consent when completing the questionnaires and students who were interviewed provided written consent as did their parent(s). Child protection procedures were followed in accordance with school and the authors' university policies and procedures. Culturally and religiously relevant pseudonyms are used for all student names. The three inner-city schools are referred to as Fitzgerald School, Snelgrove School and St Joseph's School', respectively, and the rural school is referred to as Rural School.

### ***Data analysis***

Respect for the time and effort invested by participants was critical to the data analysis; participants' voices needed to be heard as truly as is possible through to the conclusions drawn at the end of the study. Every endeavour has been made to represent accurately the views, and aspirations for the study, of the participants when analysing data.

Grounded theory relies on researchers having an interactive and intimate relationship with their data – in this study, the questionnaire returns, workshop scripts and interview transcripts. SPSS was used for the storage and analysis of quantitative data and the quantitative data are presented here as tabulations. NVivo was used to assist with qualitative data analysis. Interview transcripts and responses to open-ended questions in the questionnaire were repeatedly read and re-read, and codes helped to untangle the spoken words and writings of the individuals who took part and gave data more meaning, which allowed the puzzles thrown up by analysis to be addressed. Whilst these codes were being applied in line with the purpose of the study, memos were written alongside to 'catch' any thoughts, ideas or questions that became obvious or interesting along the way.

### **Findings**

Participants in this study indicated that whilst they want RSE to be sensitive to and respectful of faith they also want faith-sensitive RSE to be of high quality. High quality was seen by students as RSE delivered by well trained, knowledgeable teachers who were not embarrassed to teach RSE and were confident to answer questions and had good classroom management skills. Students also wanted RSE taught within a spiral curriculum through regular lessons; while enjoying the contributions of outside agencies. Students felt it was easy to miss out on important lessons if RSE was only taught through single, off-timetable days.

At the beginning of the questionnaire, participants were asked some demographic questions enabling investigation of the dynamics and subtleties, similarities and differences between various groups. More open-ended questions concerning nationality and religion allowed the students to reveal how they saw themselves and what identities (religious and otherwise) they adopted; their answers proved to be both interesting and intricate, sometimes set and sometimes changing. In Rural School, identities were less likely to refer to religion but still manifested considerable intersectionality.

### ***Differences between the four schools***



Table 1 shows how the four schools differed considerably in regards of students' religious affiliations. The three inner-city schools were characterised by high levels of religious faith. In Fitzgerald School, 53% of the students, in response to the question 'What is your faith, religion or belief system?', identified as Muslim and 27% as Christian; in St Joseph's School, 98% identified as Christian; in Snelgrove School, 85% identified as Muslim and 9% as Hindu. Across these three schools, 94% of the students responded they had a religious faith, with the remaining 6% identifying as atheists. In Rural School, the figures are very different with 26% of the students responding they had a religious faith, 35% that they were atheists and 39% that they were agnostic.

[Insert table 1 about here]

As one would expect, the difference between Rural School and the three inner-city schools also manifested in the students' responses to the question 'How important is your faith, religion or belief system to you?'. Table 2 shows that in Rural School only 12% of the students answered 'Very important' or 'Important' whereas across the three inner-city schools 74% did.

[Insert table 2 about here]

Some geographical areas, such as that surrounding Rural School, show religious adherence being well below the national average according to the 2011 census (ONS 2012), whilst in areas close to the three inner-city schools, religious observance is amongst the highest in the country (ONS 2012). Faith in God or gods may be an anathema to some, and in the 2018 British Social Attitudes survey, one in four members of the public agreed with the statement 'I do not believe in God' (Phillips et al. 2018). To others, however, faith provides a strong motivation behind who they are and what they do with their lives.

Some study participants revealed conflicts between aspects of their identity. Sometimes these conflicts stemmed from the different value systems of their religious and cultural backgrounds compared with those they felt were held by many in British society. Even those participants from a more mainstream English background, as in Rural School, who did not have the same type of conflicts due to their religion or culture, often still felt pressure from the media and their peers concerning who or what they should be, how they should act, what they should look like, and how sexually active they should be.

### ***Students' views about religion in the context of relationships and sex***

Participants in the initial focus groups that informed the development of the study suggested that faith sensitivity should contain two important elements: respect for faith and religion; and an understanding of what faiths and religions teach about relationships and sex. Accordingly, two of the questions in the questionnaire asked respondents about the extent to which they agreed with the following statements:

- 9h. I think we should learn what different religions say about relationships and sex, even if we don't have a religion ourselves.
- 19j. I think it is important to show respect for different religions in relationships and sex education.

Unsurprisingly, a large majority of the students who were attending the three inner-city schools said that both elements of faith-sensitive RSE were important. Seventy percent of them totally agreed or agreed with the statement 'I think we should learn what different religions say about relationships and sex, even if we don't have a religion ourselves'. Ninety one percent of them totally agreed or agreed that different religions should be shown respect within RSE. Generally, students from all three inner-city schools said that faith-sensitive RSE was important for schools without a strong faith adherence amongst their students because, as three students put it:

We live in a community where we are used to the different faiths and we know something about them, but in communities where the people aren't very religious, they wouldn't know if they are offending another person's religion or not.

I think that [faith-sensitive RSE] would help because it's good to know what different religions think about this topic and you can relate it to your religion as well and find out the similarities and differences and then you can come back with an opinion of your own.

I think you shouldn't necessarily censor anything. You should be very direct with it, but then after explaining everything you should tell people the different beliefs about it amongst religions.

Interestingly, students from Rural School also mostly agreed with these statements, despite these students mostly not having a religious faith. Sixty one percent of them totally agreed or agreed with the statement 'I think we should learn what different religions say about relationships and sex, even if we don't have a religion ourselves', compared to an average of 70% across the three inner-city schools, and 88% of them totally agreed or agreed that different religions should be shown respect within RSE, compared to an average of 91% across the three inner-city schools (Tables 3 and 4).

[Insert tables 3 and 4 about here]

This finding was supported by the qualitative data. For example, at the workshop stage of data collection one group in Rural School tried to understand the issues faced by Raj and Isaac in Scenario 4 (Appendix 1), which concerned a gay couple who were torn over 'coming out' to their religious parents. In response to the three questions (in italics below) that all groups were posed, they wrote:

*What are the issues do Raj and Isaac face?*

Rejection/shame from their families.

Marriage consent issues.

Guilty for bringing shame upon their families.

Blame themselves.

*What should they do?*

Be honest and proud.

Don't let religion get in the way.

*Why?*

Can't help their sexuality and who they fall in love with.

These responses reveal students trying to grapple with issues of religion. While the response 'Don't let religion get in the way' does not evidence a very nuanced understanding of the contextual specificities that Raj and Isaac might face – and the scenario remains silent about how important religion (as opposed to family) is to either Raj or Isaac, the response of this group comes across as being strongly affirmative of Raj and Isaac as human beings.

Possibly stimulated by the way Scenario 6 was written (Appendix 2), one group of atheist and agnostic students from Rural School readily identified the problems for Sam, a teenager who found herself pregnant although she was expected to be a virgin when she married, and were one of only two groups to talk about how her loss of virginity might be a factor in her choice. Some of their comments suggested a projection of their understanding of religious teaching when dealing with relationships and sex onto those whose predicament the young people found outlined in front of them. For example, it was presumed that Sam's parents would not agree with her having an abortion for religious reasons. Additionally:

[Sam would face] becoming a single mum, her parents wouldn't agree.  
Abortion? But it would not get her virginity back.

Although only a few students identified as religious in Rural School, a number of the students considered that their school should be a place where teachers could give moral guidance:

It is important that we understand that having serious relationships and sex at a young age is wrong.

Talking more about how friends can impact you and your morals. It's the stage in our life where peer pressure plays a role.

Verity, an agnostic student from Rural School, might have benefited from the religious concept of not having sex until after marriage being discussed in the classroom. In her questionnaire she wrote about how she felt that someone of her age (Year 10, aged 14-15) might be bullied for not having sex, regardless of their religious background. In interview she elaborated

I think some people think, especially people in my year group, like they are in a relationship and they feel like they have to do stuff with that person, to fit in

with their friends who have also got like in a relationship and saying what they've been doing and then they have got something to say as well. It's like so you don't feel left out of conversations and stuff, if all your friends are in relationships and you're not you can't really join in, I suppose.

Verity felt that if the school undertook more teaching about religion, students from religious backgrounds would be supported. She also felt such teaching would equip non-religious students with a greater understanding of 'difference' and would help them to understand and talk about a range of different approaches to relationships and sex:

I think we should do [learn about different religious views] because I think it then gives people a different view on sex and how different people see it. It would help people not to be quite as judgemental I suppose. Like judging somebody for being of their faith, or like race, or something and then not really understanding what they believe.

Verity felt that people from faith backgrounds might be judged, especially if it meant that they had decided not to have sex:

For not [having sex] but then if you were to learn about it [religious views] you'd understand the reasons why and it would give you a whole better view on it.

Another student from Rural School felt that learning about other religions and what they teach about relationships and sex might prevent bullying in school:

It's [learning about what religions teach about relationships and sex] really useful because when you have a friend, or someone like that, with a different religion you can understand the things they do and I think that will stop people making fun of them.

## **Discussion**

In this study, we examined the views of a range of secondary students in England, with respect to faith, religion or belief system, about whether RSE should take into account such values. The three inner-city schools were characterised by high levels of religious observance, with 94% of respondents to the questionnaire identifying as religious and 6% identifying as atheists or agnostic. In the fourth school, Rural School, only 26% identified as religious and 74% identified as atheists or agnostic. As the focus of this article is on the views of students in areas of low religious observance, we have concentrated on data from Rural School.

Exploring the contributions of participants from Rural School, it is possible to see how showing respect for and understanding faith perspectives can enrich RSE for many students and not just those from a faith background. Workshops in particular demonstrated how Rural School students thought about the possible dilemmas faced by young people, some of whom were from faith backgrounds.

The workshops worked well, in the sense that students were able to talk in depth and with nuance about the scenarios, in the inner-city schools where there was a wide range of religious observance. However, in Rural School no one in the class selected for the workshop identified themselves as religious, so that workshop proved less relevant for understanding religious responses to issues, but helped to balance the responses of the inner-city students and offered insights into the understanding of students who were not used to thinking through religious issues. Some Rural School students showed a stereotypical understanding of people from faith backgrounds, for example, when it was assumed that Sam's parents would not agree with her having an abortion, due to religious reasons, whereas the truth is that often those same families would advise abortions for their daughters to preserve the family honour. However, the workshop also demonstrated how the Rural School students tried to show empathy for the individuals depicted in the scenarios.

Our key finding is that although Rural School had low levels of faith observance, and many students there who did identify as having a faith did not feel it was very important to them, the views of its students still largely mirrored those of the more religious students in the inner-city schools with regards to how faith should be addressed in RSE.

### ***Limitations***

There are a number of limitations to the study. It only includes four schools, only one of which could broadly be characterised as 'non-religious' in terms of its student make-up. While there are benefits to designing a questionnaire in the way that we did (from student suggestions), this does mean that we have not used psychometrically-validated items, which makes it more difficult for responses to be compared with those from other studies. We did not undertake any ethnographic observation, so we have no way of knowing to what extent students' views are congruent with their behaviour. We did not undertake any interviews with parents or teachers, both of which might have enabled a more holistic understanding of the shaping of student views to have been developed.

### ***Possible implications***

It might be asked about the limits to faith sensitivity. What, for example, is a teacher to do when faced with views with which she does not agree, expressed by a student and backed up by arguments from religion – for example, the argument that men and women have different roles assigned to them by God so that women should not have authority over men? There is a large literature on how to address controversial issues in the classroom. However, not all teachers are philosophically trained to be able to determine whether particular views can be categorised as 'controversial' from an epistemological viewpoint. The most straightforward approach for a teacher is to remember that schools should be places that are as safe as possible for all students *and* that they should be places for students to learn. Often, holding impromptu discussion sessions in which students are able, again we stress, as safely as is possible, to express their views can lead to some students changing their views. Of course, there are limits to this; a teacher can and should challenge certain views as being unacceptable.

Nevertheless, it is not always possible to specify in advance precisely where such lines should be drawn. Furthermore, sometimes a teacher can play the role of ‘devil’s advocate’ as this can be a useful pedagogical device to enable students to work out for themselves, in the safe space that a classroom can sometimes afford, why certain views are not acceptable. For a knowledgeable teacher, it may be possible to teach students something about the diversity of views within religions on issues to do with gender or sexuality.

Faith sensitivity has an importance in its own right for students. In addition, there are educational agendas where faith-sensitivity in RSE can not only enhance outcomes for schools and individual students but, in the English context, provide evidence suitable for school inspections undertaken by the government agency Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills). At present, schools in England need to demonstrate to Ofsted, local authorities and/or other external bodies that they are fulfilling their obligations in the delivery of Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural (SMSC) provision, ‘Fundamental British values’ (FBV) and under the Public Sector Equality Duty (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2014), both in the curriculum and with regards to the ethos of the school. The facilitation of faith-sensitive RSE speaks to all these agendas and may also work to show how the school is fulfilling part of its Prevent Duty (Prime Minister’s Task Force on Tackling Radicalisation and Extremism 2013).

New statutory guidance in England on RSE and Health Education (DfE 2019) gives all schools the duty to consult with parents concerning RSE and requires schools to take the backgrounds of students into consideration when teaching RSE. Some parents are struggling to come to terms with some of the content of school RSE in the new guidance, even though little has changed. These parents, many of whom are from faith backgrounds, may be more reassured if training in the delivery of faith-sensitive RSE is given to school staff.

While a faith-sensitive teaching of RSE may have clear benefits in schools of high religious observance, the findings of the study reported here suggest that there may also be advantages for non-religious students in schools in areas of low religious observance. Non-religious as well as religious students may feel under pressure to behave sexually in ways they do not wish to. While Verity (discussed above) may not have wanted to have sex only within marriage, her interview indicates that she felt that she and others would benefit from receiving RSE that would enable them to resist pressure on them to have sex before they wanted to.

If RSE in England is to become faith-sensitive, then the 2010 Equality Act, and the subsequent Public Sector Equality Duty (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2014) must be important considerations. In line with these requirements, schools need to ensure that due regard is given to protected characteristics under both pieces of legislation: age; disability; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; and sexual orientation. In so doing, it is important that faith-sensitive RSE does not disadvantage students whose identities may be erased or marginalised by certain religious lenses. Indeed, if lessons are to be faith-sensitive RSE provision should also be sensitive to other groups who may be minorities in society, e.g. disabled, pregnant or LGBT+ students – and there are issues of intersectionality to consider.

All this makes heavy demands on teachers. The journey from faith-sensitive RSE, through these other sensitivities, leads ultimately to student-sensitive RSE, in which the backgrounds, identities and needs of *all* groups in classrooms can be valued and enrich the RSE experience for all students. This would help give minority group members a confident

sense of self and place, as well as enabling those from majority groups to learn and understand about, and from, those of whom they may have limited knowledge, and who they may at times misjudge or give limited regard to. Such an approach would celebrate diversity and, if handled well, bring about greater equality, not just for students with a religious faith, both in the classroom and beyond.

## Conclusion

RSE is widely acknowledged to be important but difficult to teach. Many teachers in England feel unprepared to teach it and this lack of confidence is exacerbated by the plurality of values, including religious values, among students and society more generally. In this study we have shown that there is considerable agreement among students, whatever their faith, religion or belief system, about the importance of taking values seriously in the context of teaching about relationships and sex education. Such a finding is both interesting in itself and helps simplify the job of classroom teachers attempting to teach RSE when faced with a wide range of student views about the importance of religious faith. We conclude that it is realistic for RSE to be faith-sensitive and argue that making it such can contribute to a broader, overarching aim of student-sensitive RSE.

## Acknowledgements

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**Table 1. Student responses to the question ‘What is your faith, religion or belief system?’ in each of the four schools.**

School	Percentage of respondents					
	Agnostic	Atheist	Christian	Hindu	Muslim	Other
Fitzgerald	2	16	27	2	53	
St Joseph's		1	98			1
Snelgrove		1	4	9	85	1
(Inner City Average)		6	46	4	43	1
Rural	39	35	19			7

**Table 2. The percentages of the students in each of the four schools who responded ‘Very important’ or ‘Important’ to the question ‘How important is your faith, religion or belief system to you?’**

School	Percentage of respondents	
	Very Important	Important
Fitzgerald	29	39
St Joseph's	24	40
Snelgrove	46	46
(Inner City Av.)	33	41
Rural	6	6

**Table 3. Student responses in each of the four schools to the statement ‘I think we should learn what different religions say about relationships and sex, even if we don’t have a religion ourselves’.**

School	Percentage of respondents				
	Totally Agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Totally Disagree
Fitzgerald	13	56	21	6	3
St Joseph's	23	47	13	14	3
Snelgrove	13	60	19	3	6
(Inner City Av.)	16	54	18	8	4
Rural	19	42	15	14	11

**Table 4. Student responses in each of the four schools to the statement 'I think it is important to show respect for different religions in relationships and sex education'.**

School	Percentage of respondents				
	Totally Agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Totally Disagree
Fitzgerald	44	50	5	2	0
St Joseph's	38	49	10	3	0
Snelgrove	58	32	6	1	3
(Inner City Av.)	47	44	7	2	1
Rural School	36	52	7	4	1

#### **Scenario 4**

Raj and Isaac both have a personal faith and come from very religious families. They are in the third year at university. They are very attracted to each other. Both have close friends that are girls and Isaac had a girlfriend for a short time, but they have both known for a while now, that they are only attracted to people of the same gender. Their families have made it very clear that a homosexual relationship would be unacceptable and they love and respect their parents.

What are the issues they face?

What should they do?

Why?

## Scenario 6

Sam has just found out that she is pregnant. She is expected to be a virgin when she gets married and feels very worried about the shame she may bring on her family. She thinks that her boyfriend is finding it very difficult and is not sure that he will stay around.

What are the issues she faces?

What should she do?

Why?

## Relationships and Sex Education in English Schools:

### Should it be faith-sensitive?

Thank you for taking part in this research project, it may help influence the delivery of Relationships and Sex Education in our schools.

The answers you give will be totally confidential. I am the only person who will know what you have written. All information or opinions you give will be anonymised before being shown or presented to any other person. Your name will be removed from this form.

Please answer the questions in as much depth as you can, to help me (the researcher) understand the reasons for your answers. This will help inform the analysis of the data gathered.

Where there are multiple choice questions, please circle the answer or answers that best reflect your views.

1. What age are you (in years)? .....
2. Male                      Female                      (Please circle your answer)
3. What is your faith, religion or belief system? E.g. Hindu, Atheist etc. ....
4. What is your original family nationality? .....
5. What is your nationality? .....
6. How important is your faith, religion or belief system to you?    (Please circle your answer)

Very important. (It influences everything I do)	Reasonably important	Moderately important	Not very important	Not at all important
--	----------------------	----------------------	--------------------	----------------------

7. Is your faith, religion or belief system important to?    (Please circle your answer)  
     Your family                      Yourself                      Both                      Neither

Name

8. Where or from who would you **like** to learn most of your relationship and sex education?  
 (Please circle your answer/s)

Your parents	Your friends	Your school	The media and the internet
--------------	--------------	-------------	----------------------------

Other (Please specify) .....

9. Where do you **actually** get most of your relationships and sex education from?  
 (Please circle your answer/s)

Your parents	Your friends	Your school	The media and the internet
--------------	--------------	-------------	----------------------------

Other (please specify) .....

10. Should relationships and sex education (RSE) be compulsory (**have** to be taught) in **all** schools?

Yes                      No                      (Please circle your answer)

Please give a reason for your answer to the question?

.....  
 .....  
 .....

11. Should parents have the right to take their children out of RSE lessons?

Yes                      No                      Maybe                      (Please circle your answer)

Please give a reason for your answer to the question?

.....  
 .....  
 .....



12. Should Students have the right to take themselves out of RSE lessons?

Yes                      No                      Maybe                      (Please circle your answer)

Please give a reason for your answer to the question?

.....  
 .....  
 .....

13. What characteristics would you want a teacher to have, if they were going to teach you RSE?

.....  
 .....

14. What topics ought to be taught in RSE at some point in schools?

(Give an age when you think it should be taught or put X if you think they should **not** be taught)

Topics (Primary and Secondary)	At what age should this topic be taught in schools?
a. What should a good friendship be like?	
b. Family and friends are important	
c. What are the characteristics of a relationship which is not healthy?	
d. What body changes happen at puberty (Puberty happen between 10-14)	
e. Menstruation (periods)	
f. The biology of sex	

g. The emotional side of having relationships and sexual relationships	
h. Choices about sex, where to go for help and support and the joys and possible consequences of having sex.	
i. Homophobia	
j. Lesbian, gay bisexual, and transgender issues (LGBT)	
k. Pregnancy	
l. Unintended pregnancy choices (adoption, abortion, keep the baby and where to seek support and help)	
m. Parenting	
n. Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)	
o. HIV/ AIDS	
p. Contraception and protection against pregnancy	
q. What the law says about relationships and sex	
r. Abuse and domestic violence, forced marriage etc...	

15. What else do you think should be taught about relationships and sex, in schools?

.....

Why? .....

.....

16. Is there anything that you would rather not learn about relationships and sex in any part of the school curriculum?

.....  
Why? .....  
.....

17. Where do you think you might be able to get information about relationships and sex, when you have left school and are older?

a. ....

Would you rather learn about relationships and sex education now, in school?

b. Yes                  No                  Maybe                  (Please circle your answer)

c. Why? .....  
.....

18. How do the media and popular culture influence your ideas about relationships and sex?

.....  
.....  
.....

b. If you think the media does influence you, is it in a positive or negative or neutral way?

.....  
c. Why? .....  
.....  
.....

19. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

(Please tick one of the boxes for each statement, whichever is most applicable)

Statement	Totally agree	Agree	Not sure Or not applicable	Disagree	Totally disagree
a. My parents are happy to talk to me about relationships and sex.					
b. I am comfortable talking about sex with my parents about relationships and sex.					
c. My religion gives me a code (set of standards or rules) to live my life by.					
d. Sometimes I find it hard to live by that code.					
e. I don't believe in a religion but I still have a code that I live by and it is important to me.					
f. Faith groups and faith leaders are 'good' at preparing young people for a life that will involve sex.					
g. My faith or beliefs don't affect what I decide is right about relationships.					
h. I think we should learn what different religions say about					

relationships and sex, even if we don't have a religion ourselves.					
i. My religion or beliefs affect the way I think about sex and relationships.					
j. I think it is important to show respect to different religions in relationships and sex education.					
k. I feel the pressure to have a boyfriend or girlfriend.					
l. I am comfortable seeing pictures of sexually transmitted infections, even though they are not very pleasant.					
m. I feel pressured by friends to learn more about sex and relationships than I want to.					
n. I feel pressured by school to learn more about relationships and sex than I want to.					
o. I think we should learn more about relationships and sex at school					

20. Would you happily have a serious romantic relationship with someone from a different faith or belief system to your own?

a. Yes                      No                      Maybe                      (Please circle your answer)

b. Please give a reason for your answer

.....  
.....

.....

21. What do you understand your religion/belief system says about relationships and sex?  
Give what you see as the three most important points or guidelines

a.....

.....

b.....

.....

c.....

.....

22. Do you want to live your life according to these guidelines?

a. Yes                  No                  Not sure                  (Please circle your answer)

b. Why? .....

.....

.....

23. Do you think that people of faith can feel guilty about sexual relationships before they are married?

a. Yes                  No                  Maybe (Please circle your answer)

b. Why? .....  
.....

24. Is guilt always a bad thing?

a. Yes                      No                      (Please circle your answer)

b. Why? .....  
.....  
.....

25. Do you feel there is a conflict between what your religion/belief system considers is right or wrong about sexual relationships and the way you want to lead your life?

a. Yes                      No                      Not applicable                      (Please circle your answer)

b. Why? .....  
.....  
.....

26. What have you found helpful in the Relationships and Sex Education you have received in school?

a. ....

.....  
.....  
b. Why? .....  
.....  
.....

27. How could Relationships and Sex Education be improved in your school?

a. ....  
.....  
.....  
b. Why? .....  
.....

28. What sort of relationship do you think people should be in, before they have sex?

a. ....  
.....  
.....  
b. Why? .....  
.....  
.....

29. At what age do you think it would be OK for someone to have sex for the first time?



a. ....

b. Why? .....

.....

.....

Thank you for your contribution to this research.

Jo Sell

Relationships and sex education researcher and specialist

## **Scenarios**

Please read the following situations and write your brief thoughts on each one. (Just notes, no sentences needed)

1. Jay has just found out that his girlfriend is 8 weeks pregnant. He likes her, but doesn't feel they will be together long term. He is not ready to be a Dad.  
What should he do?  
Why?
2. Chantelle has been going out with her boyfriend for about 2 months. They expect to go to university in 18 months' time. Chantelle's boyfriend keeps asking her to have sex with him. She doesn't want to as she would rather wait a bit, but she doesn't want to lose him.  
What should she do?  
Why?
3. Marcus is almost 17. He has a group of friends who talk about their sexual activity all the time. They asked him if he had had sex. When he told them that he hadn't they laughed at him. Since then they keep teasing him and ask him if he is gay. He doesn't want to cope with their jokes anymore.  
What should he do?  
Why?
4. Raj and Isaac both have a personal faith and come from very religious families. They are in the third year at university. They are very attracted to each other. Both have close friends that are girls and Isaac had a girlfriend for a short time, but they have both known for a while now, that they are only attracted to people of the same gender. Their families have made it very clear that a homosexual relationship would be unacceptable and they love and respect their parents.  
What are the issues they face?  
What should they do?  
Why?
5. Magdalena has been living with her boyfriend for around a year. Her family disapprove of them living together. The first three months were lovely, but then one night she burned the dinner, he threw the saucepan across the kitchen only just missing her. Since then he has become more aggressive, checks her phone and won't let her see her friends. Last night he forced her to have sex with him. This is not what Magdalena had expected. She still loves him, but she wants the abusive behaviour to stop. She feels her family will not be very understanding.  
What should she do?  
Why?
6. Sam has just found out that she is pregnant. She is expected to be a virgin when she gets married and feels very worried about the shame she may bring on her family. She thinks that her boyfriend is finding it very difficult and is not sure that he will stay around.  
What are the issues she faces?  
What should she do?  
Why?

### ***Religious observance scale***

An important part of the data collection and analysis may be in understanding the degree of religious observance of the participants, as this could, and some would suggest should, affect the answers of the participants (Adamczyk and Hayes 2012). At the beginning of the questionnaire, students indicated what they understood their religion or belief system to be.

It was also desirable to see whether faith-sensitive RSE might benefit those who did not see themselves as religious. A Likert-style scale was therefore developed for use in the study. Students were asked 'How important is your faith, religion or belief system to you?' and were able to choose from five options: Very important (It influences everything I do); Reasonably important; Moderately important; Not very important; Not at all important.

Those students who responded that their faith, religion or belief system was 'Very important (It influences everything I do)' were identified as 'highly religious'. Those students who responded saying they were agnostic, atheist or that their faith, religion or belief system was 'Not very important' or 'Not at all important' were categorised as 'non-religious,' enabling simple comparisons to be made between 'highly religious' and 'non-religious' students.

### **Reference**

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