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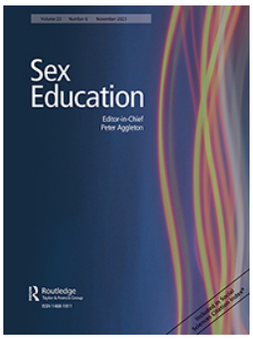

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Relationships and sex education for the postsecular classroom

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ABSTRACT

Schools in the UK and Europe, North America and Australia are introducing ambitious forms of relationships and sex education (RSE) or school-based sexuality education. For RSE to be effective it must be inclusive, recognising and respecting the needs and experiences of those who have not always been well served by sex/sexuality education. This paper considers one such group – students with faith backgrounds – and explores ways of delivering RSE in the 'postsecular classroom' in which religion is recognised and respected. We conducted consultative research – designed primarily to inform the development of teaching resources – among students and parents of faith, and RSE teachers. Focussing upon two religiously diverse cities in England, this research included systematic literature review, classroom observations and group discussions with students, and questionnaire surveys and interviews with parents and teaching staff. Informed by the findings of this research, we designed, piloted and now share evidence-based teaching resources. This illustrates one way in which RSE can be adapted for use in the postsecular classroom where faith is out in the open, but not necessarily explicitly engaged with in the lesson. Considering the perspectives of faith communities in this way can improve RSE for everyone in the classroom.

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Relationships and sex Education (RSE); school based sexuality education (SBSE); faith; secular; postsecular

Introduction

'I'm worried about sex being explained in an explicit way. We don't allow that kind of talk at home.'

'I think it is important to learn in school about the changes that happen in their bodies when they reach puberty.'

'I know that there is a lot of stigma and cultural shame when talking about this subject in our community.'

'As religious people we have an obligation to not cause harm to others.'

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These words were spoken by parents of faith – Muslim, Christian and Jewish – with children in primary and secondary schools in England. Religion is often seen as an obstacle to sex education, but these parents allude to a more complex reality. Though some parents of faith oppose sex education, others embrace it, while many more are undecided and open minded. Their children have similarly mixed views, as we shall see. This presents an important challenge for schools and teachers: to ensure that sex education considers the needs and experiences of children and young people with religious backgrounds and beliefs. To this end, we make the case for what we call postsecular sex education. Postsecularism means respecting and working with religion rather than dismissing it as anachronistic or an obstacle to progress (Beaumont 2019).

An enhanced Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) curriculum was introduced in England in 2020. New legislation required secondary schools to teach about both sex and relationships, encompassing the 'emotional, social and physical aspects of human development, relationships, sexuality, wellbeing and sexual health' (SEF 2022, 3). Primary schools are required to deliver relationships education and have the option to include sex education (DfE Department for Education 2019, 8). These developments have parallels in some other countries in Europe (Bartz 2007; Parker, Wellings, and Lazarus 2009), North America (Hunt 2022; Zain Al-Dien 2010), Australia (Sanjakdar 2009; Shannon 2016) and Aotearoa New Zealand (Allen 2011). Reaching beyond the traditional biological and reproductive focus of sex education (SEF 2022), this comprehensive school-based sexuality education attempts holistic teaching about cognitive, emotional and social as well as physical aspects of sexuality (UNESCO 2018; Allen and Rasmussen 2018; Aguilar Alonso et al. 2023).

Those developing and delivering RSE must find ways of ensuring that it serves every child and young person. This is crucial given that RSE can improve sexual health and wellbeing, reduce unintended pregnancies and STIs (SEF 2022; Kirby 2007), and help prevent sexual violence (Goldfarb and Lieberman 2021; Ofsted 2021). And yet, RSE is not always inclusive. Students are excluded and marginalised by heteronormativity and homophobia in the classroom (Flores 2012; Garcia 2009; Shannon 2016). RSE can be inaccessible to neuro-divergent and/or physically disabled students (DfE Department for Education 2021). Children and young people of colour have also been disadvantaged in RSE, as have those with religious backgrounds and beliefs, partly as a result of misrepresentation and misunderstanding. In the classroom and beyond, children in minoritised racial groups are often stereotyped as promiscuous and hyper-sexual (Garcia 2009; Lamb, Roberts, and Plocha 2017). Those with faith backgrounds are equally misrepresented, variously as oversexed and predatorial (in the case of Muslim boys and men, for example), as passive and chaste (Muslim girls and women) (Chambers et al. 2019), and as homophobic and intolerant (Shuker et al. 2021). These stereotypes matter because 'adultified' or infantilised children can be denied support and safeguarding (Davis and Marsh 2020; Bernard and Harris 2019). Moreover, these differences intersect. For example, many British Muslims have South Asian heritage, and many British evangelical Christians are Black, with cultural heritage in West Africa or the Caribbean. Intersectional differences – tracing broader patterns of racism and inequality in education – are reflected in RSE that is less inclusive than it should be.

Efforts are being made to make education more inclusive, with a range of anti-discrimination legislation and proactive equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI or DEI)

initiatives and provisions. In the UK, the Equality Act (2010) protects religion and belief, alongside eight other 'protected characteristics' including sexual orientation, ethnicity and race. Schools in England must consider 'the religious background of all pupils' and the 'religious and philosophical convictions' of parents in their teaching (DfE Department for Education 2019, 11). They are required to communicate with parents, explaining and answering questions about the RSE they plan to teach. They do not have to do what parents want but it is in their interest to engage constructively, given that parents have the right to request to withdraw their children from sex education (until three terms, around one year, before they turn 16, the legal age of consent in England) (DfE (Department for Education) (2019: FAQs).

We can think of educational settings in which religion is recognised and respected as postsecular (Sutton 2018). In a secular society or institution, religion is typically consigned to history or banished to the private sphere (Asad 2003; Jiménez Lobeira 2014; Shipley 2018). It is assumed that 'cultural and social modernisation can advance only at the cost of public influence and personal relevance of religion' (Habermas 2008: unpaginated). This secular principle is unsettled in what Jürgen Habermas calls postsecular societies by a resurgence of the 'public influence and relevance' of religion (Beaumont 2019; Habermas 2008; Ward and; Taylor 2007). In the classroom, postsecularism might mean explicitly discussing or implicitly respecting belief (Sutton 2018), acknowledging that some students come from faith backgrounds and are likely to approach subjects as varied as science and sex education through the lens of their faith.

To envision postsecular RSE, it is necessary to recognise controversies and pressures that make this difficult, then to identify and listen to stakeholders, before turning to the practical matter of informing and designing curriculum and teaching resources. Embracing each of these challenges in turn, we argue that postsecular RSE can benefit everyone.

Context: controversy and pressure

RSE can be controversial, buffeted by contrasting criticisms and protests from faith community and secular activists. Some faith leaders – including a group of orthodox rabbis – spoke out when the enhanced Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) curriculum was announced in England, advising Jewish parents to withdraw their children from sex education classes (Rocker 2019). Some parents of faith have followed this advice or moved their children to faith schools (Abdalla, Chown, and Abdullah 2018; Sanjakdar 2022). Others – including community activists – have taken these concerns to the streets, school gates and social media. Campaigners, many of whom identified or were presented in news reports as Muslims, protested an LGBT-inclusive curriculum called 'No Outsiders' at a primary school in Birmingham (Ferguson 2019). The Department for Education responded by advising schools to communicate with parents, and by providing conditional opt-outs both for schools, with primary schools not having to deliver sex education, and also for parents who were granted the right to request to withdraw under-16s from sex education (DfE Department for Education 2019).

Meanwhile, in western countries – where progressive sex education is infused and identified with secularism (Rasmussen 2015) – some critics argue that faith-sensitive RSE compromises liberal principles and human rights. In England the National Secular Society

has called upon the government not to 'give ground' on RSE, 'highlighting the bigoted messages of religious anti-RSE campaigners' (NSS 2019). In Norway, Unni Wikan (2002) has accused European governments of compromising liberal and feminist principles when allegedly prioritising the demands of conservative religious groups. Wikan illustrates the tendency for champions of liberal values to portray religious groups as 'illiberal minorities' (Calhoun 2005: xii), threatening women's and LGBT+ rights and freedoms, and undermining liberalism.

Controversies surrounding whether and how to adapt RSE for students and parents of faith revolve around: how to teach about homosexuality (Kirby and Michaelson 2008; Swartz 2003); whether to provide sex education in mixed sex classrooms; and whether to speak explicitly about sexual acts (Sanjakdar 2009). Mark Halstead and Michael Merry have discussed these questions in relation to Muslims, but some Muslims share many of the same concerns as members of other faith groups, so their arguments resonate more widely. Halstead (2005) argues that, just as halal food is routinely served in their canteens, schools should adapt the content and delivery of their sex education. He suggests teaching sex education within single-sex classes, removing 'immodest' teaching materials, and 'ensuring that the Muslim perspective on marriage' and subjects including homosexuality are 'given equal respect and prominence' (Halstead 2005, 328). Disagreeing, Merry (2005) points out that there is more than one Muslim perspective on each of these issues and argues that these adjustments dilute sex education, failing students.

While some people hold strong and entrenched views on RSE, many stakeholders have reacted to the new RSE with more open minds and pragmatism. *Islam Today* – a magazine on faith, belief, community and current affairs, published in London – ran a series of articles encouraging parents to find out about RSE and speak to their children about what they are learning, even if these conversations feel awkward and embarrassing at first (Godfrey-Faussett 2019). Similarly, the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) has aired concerns about RSE but encouraged parents to engage with schools and teachers on this subject and provided tips on how to do so (MCB 2019). In this spirit – conscious of the controversies that are likely to continue to surround RSE but looking for ways forward – we shall resist the temptation to weigh in on long-running political, pedagogical and philosophical debates about sex education. Instead, we speak to these debates by turning to practical problems of informing and developing teaching resources for postsecular RSE.

Consulting RSE stakeholders: materials and methods

To understand the experiences and needs of stakeholders – students, parents and teachers – we conducted consultative research. We collated and synthesised existing evidence through a systematic literature review. Working in Sheffield and Birmingham, both of which are religiously and culturally diverse cities in England, we listened to students, parents, and RSE teachers through classroom observations, individual and group interviews and questionnaire surveys. Rather than generating sustained empirical knowledge as an end in itself, this research was designed to inform the development of teaching resources.

We began with students with faith backgrounds and beliefs, reviewing empirical work on their experiences and perspectives of RSE (Shuker et al. 2021). We then went on to investigate students' experiences more directly through classroom observations and

group discussions in a range of secondary schools, all of which are state-funded, with a mix of faith and non-faith students. Although students are the most important stakeholders in RSE, it is also important to listen to parents and teachers, both of whom are gatekeepers to and facilitators of sex education (Ward and Taylor 1991). Accordingly, we conducted empirical research including surveys and interviews with both groups. We consulted parents including those with strong views about RSE, but others too, the latter constituting the majority. We also listened to those with expertise in delivering RSE, namely teachers and school leaders.

This consultative research utilised the following methods:

- Review of research literature on RSE and faith, focussing upon the experiences of children and young people, and on the practical implications of research findings.
- Survey of relevant teachers in the Sheffield region through an online questionnaire (15 responses) and (11) semi-structured interviews. Respondents included subject and headteachers, teaching assistants and safeguarding officers across 18 schools.
- Survey of parents of faith in the Sheffield region through an online questionnaire, which received responses from 47 Muslim, 8 Christian and 1 Jewish parent, and through 2 focus groups involving Muslims and Christian parents respectively.
- Classroom observations of RSE classes in Sheffield and Birmingham, followed by group discussions involving a total of 25 students in Sheffield, and depth interviews with 8 current and former students in Birmingham. These cities are religiously and culturally diverse, and thus provide opportunities to study the diversity that teachers elsewhere in England and in other western countries might recognise from their own experiences.
- The development and dissemination of teaching recommendations and resources involved a series of steps: beginning with the analysis of findings and their distillation into guidance for teachers; following through by designing, piloting and sharing teaching resources; and using these within the design and delivery of CPD.

The scope of the empirical work – qualitative research, offering depth rather than breadth – was designed to provide insights rather than statistically representative findings. Our sample, reflecting the profile of schools and communities in the region where we conducted this research, involved Christians and Muslims more than other faith groups. These groups are unique, but they share some characteristics with each other and with other faiths. For example, some concerns about homosexuality and sexual discourse cut across different Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). Thus, our findings will not be representative but they will be informative and suggestive, speaking to more than the immediate respondents and faiths.

The positionality of research team members is important to note because it is likely to have had an impact upon the research we conducted and the observations we made. The team included all the authors of this paper, plus other field researchers (who were invited to co-author this paper but chose not to), film makers (who produced content for the project website) and members of a project advisory group. The team also included teachers and educational consultants, and this eased communication with schools, providing access to classroom observations and introductions to current and ex-students, some of whom agreed to interviews. The team also brought

a mix of faith and non-faith backgrounds, also of positionalities in terms of gender and sexuality, though we were less diverse in some other ways. The composition of the team opened some doors more than others and identified gaps for other researchers – with lived experiences of intersectional religious and racial minoritisation – to explore in future.

This research is underpinned by a two-fold ethics. First, we followed ethical procedures for the avoidance of harm, making provisions for anonymity and confidentiality. Where this work involved people under the age of 18, enhanced ethical scrutiny was implemented including screening (through a system known in the UK as the Disclosure and Barring Service, DBS), and through research design in which safeguarding is prioritised. To compensate participants, we paid two faith groups (one Muslim, one Christian) for their time and provided a faith community organisation with an outreach worker in the form of a part-time secondment from our project team. Second, we pursued a proactive ethical stance by seeking to ensure that all participants and partners in this work could benefit from their involvement. We offered hard copies of outputs to participants. Similarly, with teachers and schools, we sought to repay contributions by designing and sharing teaching resources and providing free online and in-person continuing professional development. We intended this to guide and support teachers and, in turn, the children and young people they teach. Formal ethical approval for the work was granted by the University of Sheffield on 07/02/22 under Reference: 043718.

Findings

Informing evidence-based teaching resources

We begin by summarising the findings from a literature review of empirical studies of experiences of and attitudes towards RSE among children and young people of faith, before presenting findings from our research involving parents and carers in Table 1 and teachers in Table 2.

The research literature on children and young people's experiences of RSE includes cross-sectional questionnaire surveys (SEF 2022; Coleman and Testa 2008); focus groups (Shuker et al. 2021); and secondary literature reviews (Bartz 2007; Coleman 2008; Pound, Langford, and Campbell 2016; Sell and Reiss 2022; Selwyn and Powell 2007; Ward and Taylor 1991; Zain Al-Dien 2010). These studies concur on the following key points: students of faith, particularly but not only Muslims, feel stereotyped by teachers and classmates who assume they are socially conservative; these students would like teachers to be respectful and open minded, considering this more important than detailed knowledge of any particular religion. These studies also established that:

- A significant minority of students are dissatisfied with the RSE they receive (SEF 2022).
- The majority of students of faith want and value RSE (Coleman and Testa 2008).
- Most students of faith want more attention to religious beliefs and background in RSE and would like RSE to be more faith-sensitive, covering religious traditions, texts and values. But they don't want to be singled out in class or asked to speak for their religion (Shuker at al 2021).

Table 1. Attitudes towards RSE among parents of faith: research findings and practical recommendations. Questionnaire respondents are each identified with a unique number. Focus group participants are identified by group, both of which are anonymised.

Finding	Evidence (example)	Practical Recommendation
Parents of faith have a range of views on RSE: positive, supportive, undecided and opposed.	'I think it is important to learn in school about the changes that happen in their bodies when they reach puberty'. (18: Christian mother, son and daughter in primary school) 'The sex education curriculum is evil, and your ideas of a "healthy relationship" are not healthy to us'. (Focus Group, faith community women's association)	Anticipate the varied reception that RSE is likely to receive among parents and students of faith.
Parents of various faiths share some views about RSE. Many reject assumptions that unmarried young people will be sexually active, for example, and some are uneasy with the subject of homosexuality.	'I'm worried about sex being explained in an explicit way. as we don't allow that kind of talk at home'. (5: Muslim mother, son in primary school)	RSE cannot compromise on key issues but it may be possible to respect sensitivities surrounding the handling of these issues.
Some parents lack confidence to discuss sex and relationships with their children, and some appreciate that schools are assisting with this.	"I'm really happy if school can learn to my children [sic.] what is the healthy relationship'. (11: Mother of unspecified faith, son in primary school) 'I grew up with no sex education . . . I would've loved to learn about consent, bodily changes and growing up. I went through this alone and did go through confusion and embarrassment' which could have been avoided if these issues were dealt with in schools' (4: Muslim mother, son and daughter in primary and secondary schools)	Support parents' efforts to follow up sex education lessons at home, for example by providing resources for discussion.
Some parents of faith are positive about RSE because they see common purpose with their religion, for example respect and care for others, with clarity about consent.	'As religious people we have an obligation to not cause harm to others'. (9: Jewish mother, daughter in primary school)...	Avoid assuming that parents of faith will be resistant towards RSE. Sometimes the opposite is true.
Many parents of faith would like better communication with schools.	'Let parents know in advance [or RSE lessons]. Meet up with us. Discuss the areas we feel comfortable and uncomfortable about'. (1: Muslim mother, son in primary school)	Reach out to parents, inviting them to raise concerns and ask questions.
Many parents of faith (some of whom are recent immigrants) lack accurate knowledge of the education system and sex education.	'I don't have an issue with the subject being taught at schools. My worry is the way it's taught and the option not given to parents to agree or disagree' (4: Muslim mother, son and daughter in primary and secondary schools)	Explain why, what and how you plan to teach RSE.

(*Continued*)

Table 1. (Continued).

Finding	Evidence (example)	Practical Recommendation
For some parents of faith, language presents a barrier between family and school.	Not all parents of faith in the UK speak English. The first languages of those who responded to our survey spoke include Arabic, Pashto, Punjabi, Hebrew, Yoruba, Malayalam, Kurdish and English. Some respondents asked family members to complete the survey for them.	Translate key documents into languages that are widely spoken among faith groups at your school.
Some parents feel that teachers and schools lack awareness and understanding of their culture and religion.	'Muslim families always feel that they are targeted and misunderstood'. (4: Muslim mother, son and daughter in primary and secondary schools).	Teachers cannot be expected to have a deep understanding of all faiths and beliefs, but it helps to learn about those in your local area.
Parents bring their religion to sex, relationships and RSE.	'My religion shapes a lot of what I think, and it shapes my values'. (18: Christian mother, son and daughter in primary school) Religion plays a big part in forming our views on how to deal with … body change and puberty". (15: Muslim father, son and daughter in primary and secondary schools)	Acknowledge that culture and religion can shape attitudes to sex and relationships. Do so as positively as possible.
Views on RSE vary within (not just between) families and communities of faith.	'My husband is less enamoured with it. Perhaps, as a man he has had to face less issues around verbal and sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape, therefore not understanding the necessity'. (9: Jewish mother, daughter in primary school)	Recognise that not every member of a faith community shares the attitudes commonly taught and held within that community.

- Some students of faith feel that RSE sometimes contradicts religious values and practices, for example by assuming that teenagers are sexually active (Selwyn and Powell 2007; Coleman and Testa 2008).
- Muslim students affirm that RSE lessons at school help them discuss these subjects with their parents (Bartz 2007; Coleman 2008).
- Students who are not themselves religious and those in areas of low religious observance tend to want fellow students' faiths to be respected, but do not necessarily want to learn about religion in RSE (Sell and Reiss 2022).

These findings suggest how RSE might be improved for students of faith. We draw out these implications below in the form of recommendations and resources for teachers.

Parents' perspectives

The findings of our consultative survey of parents of faith are presented in Table 1. The key points are as follows:

Table 2. How teachers and schools are considering faith in RSE: research findings and practical recommendations. Informants are each identified with a unique number, with background information on their role and school.

Finding	Evidence (example)	Practical Recommendation
RSE teachers are busy, many teaching this as a second subject. Many would like help navigating sensitivities associated with sex and faith.	[In our school] 'no-one who teaches PSHE' – Personal Social and Health Education, which includes RSE – 'is a PSHE specialist' (4: RSE Teacher, Secondary). Teachers want resources that are 'inclusive' and 'reflect (the) community' (16: RSE Teacher, Catholic Primary).	Schools and teachers can benefit from resources and CPD on faith, sex and relationships.
Teachers and schools generally understand the challenge and responsibility to engage with parents of faith, some of whom have been misinformed through other channels of communication including social media.	'When I have taught RSE several students opt out, or say they aren't allowed to do this sort of thing'. (4: RSE Teacher, Secondary). Schools reported 'parental disengagement due to misinformation about RSE curriculum' (2: RSE Teacher, Secondary Academy)	Actively reach out to parents of faith to explain RSE, recognising that some may have been misinformed about this subject.
Some teachers are willing to examine their assumptions surrounding sex and faith.	'It really feels like home and school are at odds in [sex education] and that even initiatives to involve faith communities and the new RSE curriculum delivery are from a position of schools feeling their position is ideologically stronger and that faith communities should just change with the times (I am guilty of this myself!)' (3: RSE Teacher, Primary)	Reflect upon widely held assumptions surrounding faith, sex and relationships. Misunderstandings and stereotypes can be challenged through unconscious bias training.
Teachers in faith schools tend to feel well prepared to teach RSE within the majority faith but less confident teaching students of other beliefs and none, who may also be present.	Teachers would like to be better prepared for unexpected and unscripted 'questions that may occur' (15: RSE Teacher, Primary), including 'comments from non-faith students' (9: RSE Teacher, Secondary).	Learn about faiths and the differences between and within them. It may be helpful to consult faith leaders, but recognise that not everyone within their community will agree with them (11: RSE Teacher, Catholic Primary)
Teachers recognise that many students with faith backgrounds want to learn about sex and relationships.	Pupils of faith tend to ask 'tricky questions' about subjects such as 'single parents, divorced families, same sex couples, trans, contraception' and sexual acts (8: RSE Teacher, Catholic Primary).	Work with the 'open-mindedness' and 'curiosity of the majority of students' (9: RSE Teacher, Secondary)
School leaders recognise the lack of diversity among their staff and the consequences of this for teaching diverse classrooms.	'We do not have diverse staff; we have no Muslim staff'. (3: RSE Teacher, Primary)	Schools should seek to reflect the religious diversity of the communities they serve.
Teachers recognise that students of faith don't want to be singled out in class, and they do not want their religion in the spotlight. They want to be treated like everyone else.	RSE should 'allow pupils of different faiths to have a voice that is empowering and affirming their faith' while providing for 'pupils who don't belong to any particular faith' (2: RSE Teacher, Secondary Academy),	RSE teachers should recognise the importance of faith for students' understandings of sex and relationships, without necessarily teaching about specific religions.

(*Continued*)

Table 2. (Continued).

Finding	Evidence (example)	Practical Recommendation
Many teachers and schools want better communication with parents of faith.	Schools are trying different ways of communicating with parents of faith including online and in person consultations, with 'mixed results'. (17: Leadership Team, Catholic Primary)	Be pro-active and flexible in communication with parents, for example through translated letters and consultations, and through listening exercises.

- Parents bring their religion to sex and relationships in their own lives and in their parenting, including their attitudes to RSE.
- Parents of faith have patchy knowledge of RSE. Some are aware of the curriculum and their rights as parents, but many others are not.
- Parents of faith express a range of views about RSE. Some are very positive and supportive, others undecided, and a tiny minority strongly opposed.
- Parental views on RSE vary within as well as between faith communities.
- Parents of different faiths share some common views on RSE, such as a desire to avoid assumptions that teenagers will be sexually active, and caution about sexually explicit language.
- Some parents acknowledge that they lack the confidence and skill to discuss sex and relationships with their children, and are grateful to RSE teachers for assisting them.
- Some parents of faith are more (not less, as is often assumed) positive about RSE.
- Variable knowledge of the education system, particularly among parents of faith who are recent immigrants, adds to disquiet with RSE.
- For parents of faith whose first language is not English, language presents a barrier between the family and the school, making it harder to explain RSE.
- Many parents would like better communication with schools, with opportunities to ask questions and express concerns.
- Some parents feel that teachers and schools lack awareness and understanding of their culture and religion. Some of these would welcome efforts by teachers and schools to reach out to their communities.

The views of teachers

The findings of our consultative survey of teachers and schools are summarised in Table 2. Key points are as follows:

- RSE teachers are busy – many teaching RSE as a second subject – and would like guidance and resources to help them do this effectively, efficiently and inclusively.
- Teachers and school leadership teams generally understand their responsibilities in delivering RSE – which include reaching out to parents and maximising engagement.
- Some schools struggle to communicate with parents who have been misinformed and alienated through other channels of communication including social media.
- Many schools and teachers are self-reflexive about RSE, conscious of a tendency for educators to think they know best, and willing to examine their own assumptions and prejudices, their unconscious bias.

- Not all teachers have sufficient knowledge or confidence to address sex and relationships in diverse classrooms sensitively and without prejudice.
- Teachers in faith schools tend to be well prepared to teach RSE within their own faith but are less confident about teaching students of other faiths and none.
- Teachers recognise that students of faith don't want to be singled out in class, and they do not want their religion in the spotlight.
- RSE teachers are not always prepared for 'questions that may occur' and would like to be better prepared for the unexpected and unscripted.
- Many teachers and school leadership teams would like better communication with parents of faith.

Discussion

Acting on the consultative research findings

We now draw out a series of recommendations for RSE teachers and schools, which are informed by our research, and which advance a postsecular ethos, which begins with recognition of and respect for people of faith. We focus upon the first of the two aspects of 'faith-sensitive' RSE identified by Sell and Reiss (2022): respect for faith and religion; and understanding what faiths and religions teach about relationships and sex.

Focusing upon respect and recognition, our approach to postsecular RSE stands to complement faith-specific RSE, which may be taught within faith schools and settings, and may use resources produced by faith organisations such as the Catholic Education Service. This organisation advocates stable relationships, marriage and family life (http://catholiceducation.org.uk/schools/relationship-sex-education). Postsecular RSE, in contrast, should be faith-inclusive, benefiting everyone, not just those with religious beliefs or faith backgrounds. Our recommendations to teachers and schools may be summarised as follows:

- Inclusive teaching means treating everyone the same. Singling out children from faith communities in activities or discussion can leave individuals feeling exposed and alienated. Lesson content should be aimed at the whole class, not just children from religious backgrounds.
- Treating everyone the same means respecting and expecting everyone in the classroom to respect faith alongside (not above) other differences including sexuality. This may offend some – such as the parent who asserted that 'the sex education curriculum is evil' (Table 1) – but it should keep the majority of students and parents on board and fulfil obligations to those with different protected characteristics.
- Inclusive RSE recognises that faith can influence attitudes to RSE. When delivering RSE, teachers are encouraged to acknowledge ways in which religion can shape differing attitudes to sex and relationships, often in positive ways. Teachers should also recognise the ways in which religion intersects with other dimensions of difference including race, ethnicity, cultural heritage and language.
- Although it may be helpful to refer to religion in RSE classes, teachers are advised to ensure they do not label individuals or ask them to speak for their religion. Doing so

can cause embarrassment, expose gaps in knowledge and constrain individuals to mainstream religious positions that they might not share.
- It is possible to respect faith in RSE without teaching about religion(s); that is the domain of Religious Studies.
- Reach out to parents, paying particular attention to those who are marginalised within educational settings, for example because of their faith or language.
- Avoid assumptions about sexual attitudes and behaviour, such as the assumption that 'normal' teenagers are or want to be sexually active, or that students of faith are homophobic or chaste. These assumptions can alienate students of faith.
- To identify, challenge and begin to change assumptions about sexuality and faith, teachers are encouraged to work through unconscious bias training. Schools can help by providing and recognising this training as part of CPD.
- The visible presence of teachers of faith can help more students feel included.
- Inclusion means recognising the need for flexibility and diversity in sex education.

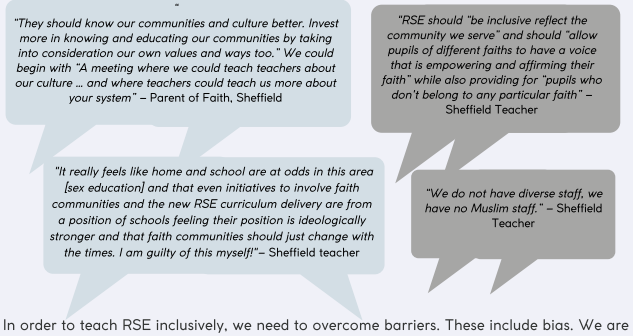
We have worked through these recommendations by developing and sharing resources, which illustrate some of the forms that postsecular RSE might take. In particular, we developed and piloted a set of teaching resources to supplement RSE teaching. These resources are implicitly postsecular in that they anticipate and address faith perspectives without making sustained references to or claims about any particular faith. Each of the resources begins with selected evidence from our research including quotations from students, parents and teachers, and then goes on to provide material that may help teachers prepare for and/or deliver RSE. In developing the resources, we have been mindful of teachers who are non-specialists in RSE and have limited capacity in terms of time and energy to put into it, but want to provide inclusive and high quality teaching on the subject. We piloted the resources in classrooms, observing the lessons in which they were used and asking teachers and students to reflect on them (see methodology above).

Figures 1-3 which follow are taken from a larger series of resources – including class exercises and discussion points – which we have posted on a website designed primarily for teachers. The website also includes films in which project team members explain RSE and introduce the resources: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/storyingrelationships/rse

We begin with a resource entitled *Challenging Unconscious Bias* that can help teachers prepare (Figure 1). Even the most thoughtful and well-meaning among us have some bias, which can get in the way of inclusive teaching. By examining unconscious bias, which includes stereotypes about faith groups and minorities, teachers can find ways to involve everyone in the room so that no students feel left out or alienated. This resource is framed positively, focussing upon things teachers can say and do, rather than fixating on pitfalls. Although parents and other members of faith communities generally appreciate the efforts of teachers and schools to invest in understanding their religion (Table 1), it is unrealistic to expect teachers to understand all the faiths represented in their classrooms, and all the differences within them (Table 2). It is more feasible for teachers to recognise that faith is important to some students and their parents, and to be aware of the concerns that some of these individuals might experience in the sex education

CHALLENGING *our* UNCONCIOUS BIAS

For use by teachers preparing to teach RSE at primary or secondary level



In order to teach RSE inclusively, we need to overcome barriers. These include bias. We are all biased. This bias is often unconscious and unintentional.

We all have the capacity to hold prejudice and unintentionally cause harm by perpetuating stereotypes, stigmas and misconceptions. This is true of teachers too. Most teachers acknowledge that they have existing assumptions about faith communities. Teachers told us they want to address these perceptions and become more confident in broaching religious questions, and understanding how children with faith backgrounds may experience their lessons.

This resource will help you prepare to teach by reducing your unconscious bias. It will help you become more aware of voices and perspectives that you might not have heard before. It will help you avoid some wrong assumptions about how children and families from diverse backgrounds might approach sex and relationships.

By addressing our biases, we can ensure we are teaching RSE in a culturally and religiously sensitive, trauma-informed way.

In this way, we can try to ensure that all students will feel included, supported and understood as they navigate their bodies, their relationships, and the world around them.

This resource is designed to aid your learning, and contains a practical guide to approaching the RSE activities in a constructively critical and unbiased way.

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Underpinning Research

This resource is informed by research with teachers, parents and communities, and young people with religious backgrounds. We found that many parents of faith felt their children's teachers did not understand their faith and/or culture, and wanted this to change. Many teachers also shared this concern, acknowledging that their insight into the faith of the students they are teaching is lacking:

- Some parents want to be better understood, with some parents feeling misunderstood, misrepresented, misjudged or ignored.
- Some teachers lack confidence in their cultural sensitivity and knowledge and would like to be better equipped and more confident in diverse classrooms.

Additional Resources

Women Making Choices: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vO8dF3_upr8
This short film:

- Challenges one of the most persistent myths about faith communities and sex relationships, specifically in relation to Muslim women in Britain. It features young Muslim women who are making choices about who, when and whether to marry.
- This film also explores ways of broaching potentially awkward topics of sex and relationships, in this case through storytelling and creative writing exercises. Some of these ideas can be translated to RSE teaching, as we show in the Resources on this website on Healthy Relationships, which includes an exercise on Fairy Tales.

What is unconscious bias?

Definition: Unconscious bias refers the ways that our societal unbringing influences discrimination and prejudice against individuals or groups based on their (for example) race, ethnicity gender, sexuality, ability, faith and age.

The term 'unconscious bias' recognises that our belief systems, the way we view others and ourselves is largely influenced by our life experiences, our relationship with power and privilege, and our compassionate access to information that questions our worldview.

Unconscious bias can lead us to tro treat other people unfairly, without meaning to. It can translate to things such as; stereotyping, harassment, hostility and aggression.
Examples of unconscious bias can include:

- Making immediate judgments about a person based on physical appearance
- Assuming someone has or doesn't have certain characteristics due to their identity,
- Feeling superior to someone because of your identity or background,
- Expecting all people from a group or demographic to be, feel or act the same

Reducing unconscious bias is linked to wider efforts to decolonise education. This might make you feel uncomfortable at times. This is a normal part of the process of challenging unconscious bias.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR THE CLASSROOM

DO SAY	DON'T SAY
'Does anyone in this room want to talk about how their faith matters to this topic?' Or, 'Could I get you to think about how your own religious beliefs guide you in this area?' Or, 'Could I get you to think about how religious family members or religious leaders guide you in this area?' These questions, which you may invite individuals to speak or think more privately about, allow you to broach the very real relevance of religion to sexual relationships, while recognising that people have choices and that their views and experiences vary.	**'You're Jewish, what do Jews think about this?'** Singling out a student in a class due to an aspect of their identity can cause them to feel exposed and alienated. The question also makes the assumption that one individual can speak on behalf of an entire religious group, which, as we have uncovered, is impossible due to the varying interpretations of Judaism and the effect of differing cultures on lifestyle and beliefs.
'This issue might affect any of us.' Or, 'You might meet someone who believes this: you'll need to know what to say.' Broaching subjects in this way, you will be able to help children to appreciate and respect the diversity of people that exist in the classroom, and ultimately in the world. Understanding other people's beliefs, values, lifestyles and experiences can foster tolerance and integration.	**This won't be relevant to _____ in the class.'** Just because a student themselves may not experience a scenario being explored in the classroom, it doesn't mean they won't encounter others throughout their life who will.
"If anything comes up that you feel uncomfortable about, you should feel free to say.' You may also find more specific ways of putting this and inviting feedback, such as 'If I've said anyone's name wrong, please let me know.' Be open to feedback from people of faith and people of colour, and others too. Make it possible for them to give feedback. Be a role model by inviting feedback and taking it well.	**Don't treat people differently. Using different tones of voice, different words and different body language – however well intentioned – can leave individuals feeling singled out. This behaviour is a form of 'microaggression'** Microaggressions are commonplace verbal or behavioural acts, which can communicate hostile, discriminative, or negative towards marginalised groups. Because some people – such as religious minorities, people with different skin colour, and people with visible disabilities – are repeatedly treated differently, these seemingly small acts add up. For example, a person whose name is repeatedly mispronounced can be left feeling like an outsider.
Faith, religion, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Mormon, Hindu and other religions and denominations, in no particular order. Diverse classrooms include many different faiths, and many different approaches to faith.	**Dont say... 'Muslim' too often.** Muslims are one of many faith communities and should not be used too frequently as the example for religious diversity
'I'm aware that the colour of peoples' skin will affect their life experience.' People with different skin colours may need specific support. Since many people of faith are also members of racial minorities, some children with faith backgrounds may need specific support.	**I don't see colour / I treat all students the same.'** Within our efforts to ensure all people are treated equally, we must ensure that we do not ignore the racism and societal inequalities that influence the lives of non-white people.
'Most, many, or some,' when referring to the ways in which people of faith approach sexual relationships. Being specific, you can avoid generalisations, and also recognise the ways in which individuals are able to find and make choices of their own. For example, you might say that 'different Christians have different views on sex outside marriage' and that 'many Christians have sex before marriage'.	**All [members of a given faith community] think/do [sexual relationships in particular way].' For example, 'All Roma marry within their community.'** Generalising is a form of discrimination which reinforce stereotypes that are often untrue, manipulated or exaggerated. When we do so, we assume that an entire group or demographic of people think, feel or act the same way and have real, material consequences for those impacted. An example of this could be "All Muslim communities practice arranged marriage" or "all LGBT+ people have casual sex".

Figure 1. Challenging unconscious bias.

classroom, while avoiding negative stereotyping and presumptions. Unconscious bias training can help in all this.

Some people find sex and relationships embarrassing and even shameful to talk about (Hunt 2022). Some children and young people with religious backgrounds experience this awkwardness particularly acutely. They are not alone. Other reasons for embarrassment include cultural taboos on sexual discourse, and heteronormative assumptions that can marginalise LGBTQ+ students (Flores 2012; Garcia 2009; Shipley 2018). But embarrassment should not be allowed to close down conversations about sex and relationships because silence has harmful consequences (DesRochers 2022). The *Shame and Pride* resource (Figure 2) provides practical tips for breaking silences and dispelling embarrassment. This resource broaches a series of issues that some people might find shameful – such as buying condoms and attending a sexual health clinic – and aims to challenge this shame, first by inviting students to speak more freely, then by encouraging students to replace shame with pride. Talking can help by dissipating the sense of shame and empowering young people to identify and make their own choices, ranging from choosing not to have sex to choosing a same-sex relationship. Discussion points in the resource allow – but do not force – conversations about faith, shame and pride by asking: Is there anything else that might influence your feelings in this situation? For example, your background, prior experiences, faith or religion?

We preface another teaching resource – Body Mapping (Figure 3) with – a quotation from a parent in Sheffield: 'Religion plays a big part in forming our views on how to deal with … body change and puberty'. This resource explains that our backgrounds, culture and religion affect the way we see, think about and relate to our bodies. The resource is designed to support students to speak and think about their bodies. It builds upon findings showing that playful and creative activities can not only be more fun than formal classroom tasks such as reading and writing; they can also be more effective (Renold and Timperley 2023; Swartz 2003). This activity helps students to depict parts of the body associated with pleasure, pain, shame and pride, and invites them to see how their relationship with their body is mediated by cultural and social factors such as attitudes to beauty and body size and also by more personal attributes such as their religion. With a light touch, this exercise broaches some challenging issues, involving students of faith without singling them out.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to make a case for faith to be acknowledged in RSE without necessarily making it explicit, pinpointing particular religions, or drawing unwelcome attention to individual students. Our recommendations are underpinned by evidence, and we have introduced resources (alongside others that we have made available online) that could assist teachers in making their curriculum more inclusive. We acknowledge that these resources are by no means exhaustive but through integration with other national and regional resources, the overall menu for sex education can become more nuanced and sensitive to the needs of students and parents of faith.

SHAME AND PRIDE

Year Groups 7–11

"Women are often shamed within their cultures for speaking about [sex] " Year 12 Student, Sheffield

"My school instilled fear into students. We had no power. Not at all empowering... Sex was demonised and categorised alongside drugs" Former pupil of faith school, Midlands

"It's important to talk about shame. If this was presented in lessons [someone experiencing shame] could relate to it, and share it" Year 12 Student, Sheffield

"School made me feel shame. The school culture was prudish and old fashioned". Former pupil of faith school, Midlands

While there's lots of things about bodies and relationships that we can be proud of, young people say there are some issues which can be 'embarrassing' or taboo and may cause feelings of shame and stigma. These issues might be avoided in lessons to avoid embarrassment, but this lack of conversation can mean people feel unequipped and unsupported in navigating their personal experiences and are unable to make informed decisions relating to their bodies and relationships.

Embarrassment and shame can relate to culture and faith. Relationships between shame, culture and religion can be complex and must not be generalised. This exercise allows students to think about shame and pride. While some cultures and religions do adhere to traditional understandings of shame and honour, important differences within and between cultural and religious groups mean that it is wrong to generalise. Embarrassment and shame have multiple origins, ranging from religious teachings to the customs of a particular community or family, the culture of a particular school and the atmosphere in its classrooms. The ex-pupil in the West Midlands, quoted above, illustrates this last point. She felt shamed by the culture of her school – the kind of problem that teachers have opportunity to solve.

This creative writing activity is designed to build upon the learning from the Body Mapping exercise. Before starting the activity, briefly establish what your students define as embarrassment, shame and stigma.

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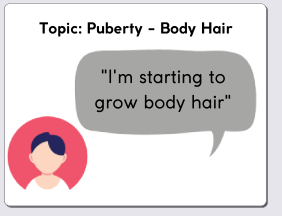
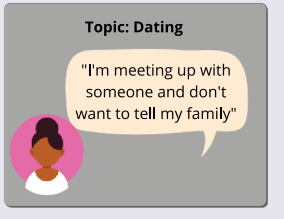
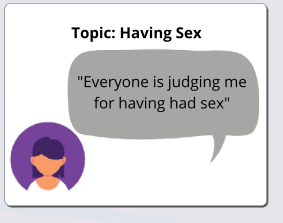
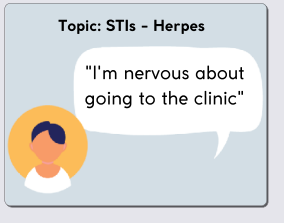
Classroom Activity

Scenario Cards









Classroom Activity Using Scenario Cards

1. Split your students into groups and give each group a selection of the Scenario Cards. **Note to teacher: Select scenario cards appropriate to your age group.**

2. Ask the group to discuss: **How might this young person feel in this situation? For instance, is it exciting? Might it feel embarrassing? Might it make you feel nervous? Or perhaps proud?**

3. **Is there anything else that might influence your feelings in this situation? For example, your background, prior experiences, faith or religion?**

4. **What might help this person on the card to experience this situation without shame or embarrassment?**

Teacher's Notes

1. It's important to distinguish with your class what they consider as shameful, and what they consider as embarrassing. It's likely the two will be different. For example, accessing contraception may not be considered shameful, but the process of doing so may be embarrassing. It is useful to discuss their differences between shame and embarrassment: embarrassment is often about what other people think of you: shame is more about what you think about yourself.

2. It is also helpful to distinguish the sources of embarrassment and shame. Does embarrassment always come from inside, or do other people make us embarrassed? Consider, for example, family, friends, teachers, GPs, pharmacists, receptionists etc?

3. Consider how people may experience pride and embarrassment differently in relation to body hair? It may be helpful to consider factors such as gender, race and age. Note that in some Western societies, body hair is often perceived as 'unhygienic' or 'unsightly', especially for women. How might those who can't grow body hair feel?

4. When referring to a religious or cultural group, it is important to speak of 'some' communities, or 'some' individuals rather than generalising.

5. Some people might not want to talk about menstruation. Some communities celebrate periods, as they are a symbol of transitioning from childhood into adulthood. It is important to remember that just because a young person has started their period, this does not mean they are ready to take on adult responsibilities or engage in sexual relationships.

Additional Resources

- **Halal Dating**
This video, made by a group of young British Muslims, explores their own understandings of 'dating'.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=_l9bHRgttqs

- **Menstruation and Religion**
This online menstrual health education guide, aimed at young people, includes interviews exploring menstruation within their religion.
www.redcloudproject.co.uk

Figure 2. Shame and pride.

BODY MAPPING

Year groups 10-11

Children "enjoy standing up, moving around, being active and performing rebellious behaviours such as ripping up paper." This helps them to learn about "awkward" subjects like body parts. Conversely, "Sitting and writing interrupts the flow of conversation." Teacher, Sheffield

"Religion plays a big part in forming our views on how to deal with ... body change and puberty." Parent of faith, Sheffield

"I work with my daughter (aged seven) on being open and frank about our bodies and what different parts are called, why it's important to keep some areas private and when it is safe for others to see or touch them, i.e., the doctor." Parent of faith, Sheffield

Our backgrounds, culture and religion and our experiences affect the way we see, think about and relate to our bodies.

Body mapping is an exercise that creates a space for students to think on their relationship with their body.

This activity will provide a foundation for other discussions to do with body image and self-esteem. We recommend that children do not share their personal reflections with other children, as they may be personal and sensitive. Because this activity may remind children of difficult of traumatic memories, you should ensure that you signpost them to support that is available. For example, they could see an adult at break time or write a note in a comments box.

The learning from this exercise can then be returned to across the curriculum (and is designed to complement the activities in the KS3/4 resources: *Shame and Pride, Empowering Relationships and Consent* and *your Rights (also available in this Resource Pack).* They can also contact *Childline, 0800 1111.* Always follow your school's safeguarding procedures.

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Body Mapping Activity

Ask everyone in your class to:

- Draw an outline of a body
- Use different colours or place symbols to indicate on the body sites of:

△ Pleasure ■ Pain

◯ Shame # Pride

- Then, make their body into a person by giving it distinguishing features (a face, hair, clothes for example)
- Reflect on their body map using the discussion points below.

Helpful Discussion Points

- Are any of the Pleasure, Pain, Shame & Pride markers not in obvious places?
- Has anyone placed two or more markers in the same place? For instance, pain and pleasure may be in the same place. Why might this be?
- Has anyone drawn any aspect of:
  - Sex or gender? How is this depicted?
  - Race or ethnicity? How is this depicted?
  - Religion? Faith? How?
  - Disability? (Including hidden disabilities?) How?
  - Age? E.g. A youthful or aging body and how is this depicted?
  - Body size? Fatphobia is rife, but often not talked about.
  - Adornments (eg tattoos, piercings, jewellery), what do these say about a person's identity?
- Discuss other features that might be depicted

Teacher's Notes

Although not all children will fully understand what this exercise is trying to teach them, most gain some understanding of their relationship with their body. They can also become more comfortable with speaking about their body, and may understand that their bodies have significance, not only physical, but emotional, cultural and - in some cases - religious. We strongly recommend looking at the addition resources below because although this activtity appears simplistic, it can uncover a wealth of complexity.

Additional Resources

It's got to be about enjoying yourself: young people, sexual pleasure, and sex and relationships education by Julia Hirst
Whilst recognising apprehensions around including pleasure in the RSHE curriculum, this paper highlights the importance of providing positive and comprehensive Relationships and Sex Education.
http://shura.shu.ac.uk/6758/

Genderbread Person
A useful resource made by Genderbread.org and explained using voiceover by SAYiT Sheffield. The Genderbread Person uses body mapping to explore gender and sexual identity, with Sex, Identity, Expression and Attraction used as markers.
https://www.genderbread.org/

Iraqi and Syrian refugees using body-mapping to share their stories by Dr Yafa Shanneik
This article explores how body-mapping was used as a tool of healing for refugee men and women, who through art, expressed their thoughts and feelings both on their refugee journey and their new lives in their host countries.
https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/summer-showcase-2019-iraqi-syrian-refugees-body-mapping/

Body Mapping Exercise with Michelle Maldonado
For those interested in more advanced body mapping - for example, as a meditative practice - there are lots of resources on YouTube to support you in your learning. This video invites us to take notice how our bodies react when we think of someone we love. This is a good example of how body mapping can be used with positive emotions.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZtbr8vbyfk

4.

Example Responses

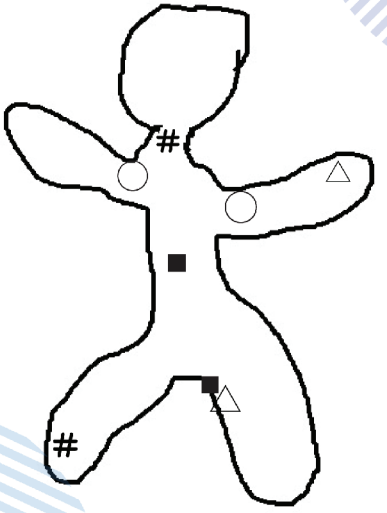

Figure 3. Body mapping.

Our consultations with teachers highlight that faith-sensitive sex education stands to benefit students of faith and reassure their parents, who are then less likely to want to withdraw them from sex education, while also benefiting others in the classroom who may not have religious backgrounds or convictions. This faith-sensitive teaching may help students with religious backgrounds feel recognised and valued, and it can help others to develop empathy and understanding for classmates and fellow citizens (Goldfarb and Lieberman 2021). This means that postsecular RSE need not involve compromise; on the contrary, considering the sensitivities and perspectives of faith communities can improve RSE for everyone, students of all faiths and none.

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