A Qualitative Exploration of Children and Young People's Experiences of the Secondary Relationships and Sex Education Curriculum

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List of Acronyms

Acronym	Description
BPS	British Psychological Society
CASP	Critical Appraisal Skills Programme
CYP	Children and Young People
DAEP	Doctorate of Applied Educational Psychology
DfE	Department for Education
EP	Educational Psychologist
EPS	Educational Psychology Service
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulations
LA	Local Authority
MPs	Members of Parliament
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses
PSHE	Personal, Social and Health Education
RSE	Relationships and Sex Education
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SEF	Sex Education Forum
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disability
SLR	Systematic Literature Review
SRE	Sex and Relationships Education
TEP	Trainee Educational Psychologist
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
WOE	Weight of Evidence

Abstract

Over the past decade numerous concerns have been raised about the effectiveness, appropriateness and standard of secondary school-based Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) in England (Greening, 2017; Ofsted, 2013). In March 2017, then Education Secretary, Justine Greening, announced statutory Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) for all secondary school pupils (Greening, 2017). The curriculum became constitutional on 1st of September 2020 (DfE, 2019).

In view of this curriculum change, it is important to acknowledge previous literature that has recognised the importance of listening and advocating for the voice of children and young people (CYP) to promote positive sexual knowledge (Aggleton et al., 2000; Strange et al., 2006). At the time of writing this thesis, the researcher was unaware of any qualitative studies in England which had explored CYP's experiences of the RSE curriculum post reforms. As such, the researcher aimed to explore CYP's (aged 11-16) experiences of school based RSE, with an additional focus on how CYP experience the teaching of consent, as part of the RSE curriculum.

A Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021) was conducted on transcripts of three individual interviews and three small focus groups. The researcher identified five themes: A conflict of interest between espoused practice and policy and a curriculum important to CYP; Current teaching practices do not align with CYP's preferred methods; A perceived lack of trust, confidentiality and lack of positive student-teacher relationships; The classroom environment does not enable feelings of safety and comfort; and finally, Do CYP really understand consent?

Overall, findings suggested that CYP perceived current RSE pedagogy as unsatisfactory. The research has relevance for professionals working with CYP, including Educators, Health Care Professionals, Educational Psychologists (EPs) and Government Officials. The thesis concludes by discussing implications around individual and systemic support, alongside limitations and potential areas for future research.

Acknowledgements

Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Positioning and aims of the current study

The current research was undertaken within the professional training for the Doctorate in Applied Educational Psychology (DAEP) at the University of Nottingham. To date, there have been very few qualitative studies in England which have explored CYP's experiences of school-based RSE. Previous studies which have attempted to obtain the views of CYP either predate the reformed statutory RSE curriculum or focus heavily on sexual health and sexual violence.

Through a critical realist paradigm, the current research aimed to explore CYP's (aged 11-16) experiences of school-based RSE in England, with an additional focus on how CYP experience the teaching of consent, as part of the RSE curriculum. The study reflects current legislation and national policy around RSE, and is believed to be the first to explore CYP's experiences post-reforms (DfE, 2019a).

1.2 Personal and professional interest in the research

RSE has become an area of interest to the researcher since working as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP). As a TEP the researcher has had numerous conversations with schools around how the curriculum is offered to young people, particularly those who may find school attendance challenging. Ensuring CYP have access to comprehensive RSE, has been at the forefront of many of the researcher's consultations and systemic tasks as a TEP.

Within a wider societal context, there appear to be increasing discussions around RSE in schools. The RSE curriculum has received increased media attention due to concerns held by anti-RSE lobbyists, concerned adults and some politicians. As such, the curriculum has received increased attention from the Department for Education (DfE), who have called for a review of RSE in 2023.

The literature recognises that young people often feel disconnected from policy makers because they are rarely given the opportunity to share their views about topics pertinent to them. As a TEP, whose role is to empower and advocate for the voice of young people, the researcher felt the thesis would allow the voice of the child to be heard by a wealth of educators and professionals.

Throughout the process the researcher has engaged in reflexive journaling. Reflexive comments have been presented throughout the study in line with a critical realistic positioning. Reflexivity has enabled the researcher to share her own personal experiences, while acknowledging how her own preconceptions may have informed the way in which she understood and interpreted the young people's stories.

1.3 Overview of the current study

Chapter One: presents a contextual summary of the research and provides the reader with an overview of the chapters to follow.

Chapter Two: presents a summary of the historical background of the RSE curriculum, dating from the late 1800s to current day practice. Contextual information demonstrates how the current curriculum has been shaped by legislation and policy. A qualitative systematic literature review then follows. The chapter concludes by discussing the importance of working with CYP.

Chapter Three: provides a methodological account of the researcher's ontological and epistemological positioning which informed the research design. The researcher provides a description of the qualitative methods and measures adopted to ensure a high-quality, ethical, research study. Details of data collection and analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) RTA are presented.

Chapter Four: presents the researcher's analytical interpretations of the data gathered during three individual interviews and three small focus groups. The researcher presents an analytical account of the findings, where themes and subthemes are presented alongside literature presented in Chapter Two.

Chapter Five: concludes by presenting a summary of the research findings within a wider discussion. The thesis concludes by outlining limitations of the current study, as well as potential implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2 – Context of the Literature Review

The chapter will begin by providing a summary of the historical background of the RSE curriculum. The researcher has chosen to summarise the development of the curriculum in order to ensure the reader has a comprehensive understanding of how RSE is situated within Government legislation and policy. The chapter will discuss the reformed RSE curriculum introduced to England in September 2020, (DfE, 2019a) and explain how 'sexual consent' and 'healthy sexual relationships' are now an integral part of RSE. The historical background will contextualise the aims and research questions of the current study.

A qualitative systematic literature review will be presented, which answers the question: *What can the literature tell us about secondary aged CYP's (11-16 years old) experiences of school based RSE in England?* The synthesis includes findings from four relevant studies and presents discussions within wider literature. A qualitative literature review was favoured as qualitative data has been previously successful in providing detailed first-hand accounts of what CYP find helpful about school based RSE (Blake, 2008).

The chapter will conclude by summarising what is already known within existing research while outlining where additional research is required. This will allow the researcher to situate the current study within a wider contextual stance, while drawing on theories of adolescence and highlighting the importance of working with, and advocating for, the voice of young people.

2.1 A brief history of Sex and Relationship Education (SRE)

The following section will provide a narrative of the timeline of SRE. The purpose of this section is to situate the development of the SRE curriculum within a Government agenda by considering how CYP have previously received school based SRE.

2.1.1 SRE in England from the late 1800s to 2000

As it was first termed, 'Sex Education', became part of the political agenda in the late 19th and early 20th century. At the time, Sex Education programmes focused primarily on physical sexual hygiene (Mort, 2002; Weeks, 1986) following concerns around poor public health and safety (Pilcher, 2004). One of the earliest calls for school based SRE was recorded in the 1870's (Hall, 2004).

During World War One (1914-1918), then Government encouraged parents and carers to take responsibility for providing Sex Education as there was a lack of funding to run comprehensive educational schemes (Hall, 2004). Within schools, Sex Education was solely delivered as part of the biology curriculum, with content focusing on preparing CYP for marriage and parenthood (Pilcher, 2004).

World War Two (1939-1945) further delayed a formalised SRE curriculum (Pilcher, 2004). Although lack of funding halted the implementation of an SRE curriculum, the importance of such a curriculum was beginning to gain attention (Thomson, 1994). In response to a soaring number of sexually transmitted diseases (Jones, 2011a), the Government published guidance on '*Sex Education in Schools and Youth Organisations*' (Board of Education, 1943). The document shifted the narrative from parental responsibility to school responsibility. It outlined that teachers must deliver age appropriate SRE, with a focus on mutually respectful relationships and sex once married.

Unfortunately plans to reform SRE were halted in 1947 when the Labour Government dissolved and the funding body required to support the reforms (The Central Council for Health Education) redacted responsibility.

In the 1950's and 1960's attitudes to Sex Education began to change and there was a greater emphasis on schools taking responsibility for providing specific sex education. Documentation including the '*Handbook of Health Education'* (Ministry of Education, 1956) and the '*Health Education Handbook'* (Department of Health and Science, 1968) were published. The documents emphasised the importance of educating CYP about reproduction, puberty and contraception. The documentation also began to destigmatise premarital sex and encouraged CYP to discuss the social and emotional investment of sex.

The 1970's saw a surge in sexual health campaigns. Sex Education lessons were delivered by the UK Family Planning Association, commissioned by the Government, (Hall, 2004; Carabine, 2004) and CYP were taught in same sex classes. A particularly progressive curriculum was proposed in '*Health Education in Schools*' (Department of Education and Science, 1977). The document included themes of masturbation and same-sex relationships, and recognised the importance of sex being for pleasure as well as for reproduction. Parents

were discouraged from withdrawing CYP from Sex Education in a bid to prevent misinformation.

The 1980's saw educators and parents divided over the teaching of Sex Education. Some political groups lobbied for increased parental rights to withdraw CYP from SRE lessons, while liberal factions fought for a statutory SRE curriculum (Hall, 2004). The 1986 Education Act (DfE, 1986) positioned school staff and governors as responsible for outlining individual school's SRE curriculum (Haberland & Rogow, 2015). While there were greater opportunities for CYP to be taught more liberal ideas, schools were unable to offer a comprehensive Sex Education programme, as the Conservative Government passed legislation banning the '*promotion*' of same-sex relationships (Section 28).

In the 1990s, the DfE the Sex Education Forum (SEF) to explore how SRE was being delivered in schools. The DfE found widespread uncertainty amongst school staff and governors as to how SRE should be positioned within the National Curriculum (Jones, 2011b). The report concluded that there were inconsistencies across schools resulting in CYP receiving SRE lessons of differing quality and quantity (Scott & Thomson, 1992). For many the SRE was deemed to be marginalised (Jones, 2011b).

In an endeavour to resolve these discrepancies, in 1996 a comprehensive formalised Sex Education programme was brought to the National Curriculum (DfE, 1996). Biological elements of Sex Education were made obligatory in secondary schools (DfE, 1993; Jones, 2015), while science lessons taught CYP about sexually transmitted diseases. Whilst the curriculum was being formalised, parental capacity to withdraw CYP from SRE lessons was reinstated (Denman et al., 1994).

In 2000, the Labour Government published the '*Sex and Relationship Education Guidance'* (Department for Education and Employment, 2000), which proposed that schools should provide SRE within the non-statutory Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) curriculum. The guidance recommended that schools teach not only biological elements of sex, but also provide information relating to relationships, sexual health and sexuality (Alldred & David, 2007). The curriculum's four main goals included: (1) supporting CYP to develop confidence and responsibility; (2) preparing CYP to become active citizens; (3) ensuring CYP have safe and happy lifestyles; (4) supporting CYP to develop relationship skills

and to respect individual differences. The document proposed that '*effective sex and relationships education is essential if young people are to make responsible and well-informed decisions about their lives'* (DfEE, 2000:2).

The Labour Government suggested that effective SRE was to be delivered through a 'whole school approach' (DfEE, 2000:9). The role of parents and carers was emphasised, while the Government acknowledged that teachers and educators needed appropriate support and training to ensure the curriculum was responsive to CYP's individual needs. For the first time, cultural appropriation was noted, acknowledging that CYP should be taught about a wealth of diverse family backgrounds (DfEE, 2000:12). The guidance also complimented media campaigns at the time, by aiming to address high levels of teenage relationship abuse, by teaching CYP how to maintain healthy relationships.

2.1.2 Stagnation of SRE: 2000-2017

Over the following 17 years, developments in the SRE curriculum appeared to stagnate. While there were no revolutionary reforms to constitutionalise SRE, there were several legislative and policy developments which may have impacted upon how SRE was taught in schools.

Children's safeguarding became a prominent part of the education agenda in the early 2000s. The Education Act 2002 (Education Act, 2002) and the document '*Keeping Children Safe in Education*' (DfE, 2016) demonstrated the need for schools to take on greater safeguarding responsibilities. An extensive restructure of children's services took place at a national and local level because of the '*Every Child Matters*' green paper (Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 2003) and in 2003, schools were deemed 'allowed' to teach same sex relationships. CYP rights around sexual orientation were later protected by the 2010 Equality Act (DfE, 2014b); these reforms felt progressive and pertinent.

2.1.2.1 Issues with positioning SRE within PSHE

Towards the end of 2008, a '*Review of Sex and Relationships Education in Schools'* was published (External Steering Group for the DfE, 2008). While the report was welcomed by the Government, it failed to make SRE or PSHE a statutory part of the education curriculum. The review highlighted that educators felt it was difficult to position SRE in schools, as content had to be integrated into the wider PSHE curriculum. Teachers felt limited by the time and resources that could be spent on delivering important content which would help

to upskill and protect CYP (Macdonald, 2009). The Children, Schools and Families Act (DfE, 2010), continued to highlight the importance of SRE as a standalone part of the curriculum. The Act suggested that CYP should receive a minimum of one year's taught SRE, before leaving school.

In 2013, the DfE commissioned a consultation on PSHE (DfE, 2013a). The commission highlighted inconsistencies in the pedagogy of PSHE and SRE across school settings. Disparities across schools were noted within the wider literature, with a lack of mutual understanding by teaching staff regarding the purpose of PSHE and SRE (Formby et al., 2011). In an attempt to address differing levels of education, the PSHE Association was provided with funding to upskill teachers and ensure high quality pedagogy practices. While funding was available, the DfE continued to suggest that SRE should be non-statutory, to allow for a flexible teaching programme (DfE, 2013a). At the time, these recommendations reflected the views of many parents, who argued that they had a primary responsibility for providing their children with information on sex and relationships.

2.1.2.2 2013 Ofsted Report – 'Not Good Enough Yet'
In July 2013, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, conducted a report titled '*Not Yet Good Enough*' (Ofsted, 2013). The article evaluated the quality of school based SRE in England. The report concluded that a third of school based SRE was 'inadequate'. Inconsistencies across schools were found, which many proposed was due to a lack of structure in the SRE curriculum. Ofsted determined that CYP were unprepared for emotional and physiological changes. They reported that in secondary schools, the curriculum failed to acknowledge topics such as 'healthy sexual relationships' and 'staying safe', and unlike other academic subjects, there was no method of tracking CYP's progress in school based SRE.

2.1.2.3 Inadequate SRE
Similar conclusions about the quality of SRE have been drawn by academics and researchers. Jackson and Scott (2004) and Welling and Johnson (2013) concluded that the quality of SRE varies across the United Kingdom, with CYP in the most vulnerable areas of the country receiving the poorest education. It has been suggested that financial constraints are a limiting factor for CYP accessing appropriate education (Alldred & David, 2007; McGeeney, 2013). In 2013, Coy and colleagues (Coy et al., 2013) concluded that SRE failed

to provide CYP with a safe and reflective space to discuss thoughts around sex and relationships.

The quality of SRE was discussed in Parliament by Baroness Gould of Potternewton (Children, Schools and Family Bill, 2010). The debate highlighted that the current provision failed to provide age appropriate, high quality SRE. It was felt that CYP were excluded from discussions around curriculum content, and Baroness Gould suggested that a new curriculum was needed to address issues that CYP felt were pertinent to their lives. Over the next few years, the Home Affairs Committee lobbied to make PSHE compulsory, while the SEF campaigned for statutory SRE.

In a bid to try and offer support on how to teach topics including, but not limited to, sexual abuse, sexual consent and healthy relationships, the PSHE Association published guidance titled '*Sex and Relationship Education for the 21st Century'* (Brook et al., 2014). The guidance emphasised that further work was needed to ensure SRE was inclusive for all CYP, including those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) (Murphy, 2016). This felt pertinent as it had been suggested that some CYP with SEND may have less knowledge about sexual issues (Murphy & O'Callaghan, 2004) and as such may need additional education to ensure they can navigate appropriate relationships in adulthood (Martinello, 2015; Westminster Education Forum, 2018). The guidance also suggested that SRE should enable CYP to develop 'positive vocabulary' and skills to stay healthy and safe. For SRE to be successful the guidance recommended that teaching of SRE should be part of a whole school agenda and wider curriculum.

2.1.3 Summary of the history of SRE until 2017

Thus far, the researcher of the current study has attempted to outline the historical background of SRE up until 2017. While external steering groups for the DfE, academics, researchers and professional bodies such as Ofsted and the SEF have recommended the need for an inclusive and comprehensive SRE delivered by educated professionals, in partnership with parents, thus far the responsibility and monitoring of such a curriculum has been left to individual schools. It is understood by the researcher of the current study, that such flexibility has left school staff uncertain as to how SRE is situated within PSHE and the wider school curriculum.

Some academics and policy makers have suggested there are benefits to constitutionalising the SRE curriculum. Arguments for a statutory SRE curriculum have included streamlining the curriculum content and teaching practices to ensure all children receive an education of high quality. Those who have argued against constitutionalising the SRE curriculum have instead suggested that educators should continue to have autonomy in defining what is taught as part of the curriculum and how it is taught.

In a bid to clarify whether the SRE curriculum should be statutory, an inspection of school based SRE was conducted by the Conservative Government in 2017. Members of Parliament (MPs) were invited to vote on whether SRE should become compulsory in schools in England. The reforms were announced by Education Secretary Justine Greening in March 2017 (Greening, 2017). The vote enforced statutory 'Relationship Education' in primary and secondary schools, and statutory 'Relationships and Sex Education' in all secondary schools.

The following section of this chapter will therefore present an outline of the reformed 'Relationships and Sex Education' curriculum. To reflect the reforms, the researcher has adopted the acronym 'RSE' throughout the rest of the study. The section will begin by contextualising the new reforms within legislation and policy. The researcher will discuss the rights of parents and carers, as well as the role of teachers in delivering the RSE curriculum. The researcher will begin to discuss the RSE curriculum while drawing the reader's attention to teaching on sexual consent (an integral part of reforms). The researcher has chosen to present the literature in this way to introduce the reader to key topics explored as part of the aims of the current study. In brief, the current study aims to explore CYP's experiences of school based RSE and the teaching of consent as part of this curriculum. The study's aims and rationale will be discussed further in section 2.6.1.

2.2 Time for change 2017 – Relationships and Sex Education

In 2017 MPs voted for or against constitutionalising the RSE curriculum; those in favour of statutory RSE won the vote. '*The Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education and Health Education (England) Regulations 2019*' were expected to be made constitutional in September 2019, however as Government advisors did not meet the timescales outlined, legalities were delayed until 1st September 2020 (DfE, 2021)

The Government aligned RSE as part of the broader PSHE curriculum under the '*2017 Children and Social Work Act*' (2017). The reforms aimed to set out a 'comprehensive programme of engagement', which included 'age-appropriate subject content' through 'high-quality teaching' (Greening, 2017). The reforms were supported by medical and health care professionals, teaching unions and the Police (PSHE Association Strategic Partners Group, 2018). The reforms aimed to address societal pressures and reflect timely world issues. Academics and policy makers hoped that statutory RSE would; (1) ensure teachers received appropriate training to deliver a comprehensive RSE curriculum (a minimum of 10 hours initial training); (2) allow appropriate time to be allocated for the delivery of RSE in schools; (3) standardise the consistency of pedagogy practices though regulatory systems such the Ofsted inspection framework (World Health Organisation, 2010).

2.2.1 Working with parents and carers

The reforms outlined parents' and carers' rights within their child's education. The new reforms stipulated that parents and carers are unable to remove CYP from statutory subjects (Health or Relationship Education) or from topics covered in Biology (e.g., reproduction) (DfE, 2019a). Within the primary school setting, children can be withdrawn from Sex Education, however in secondary schools, consent for removing CYP requires agreement from the Headteacher until three school terms before the YP turns 16. When the YP turns 16, it is their right to decide whether they wish to take part in Sex Education.

The new reforms have resulted in some backlash from parents and carers, particularly those whose children attend primary school settings. Within the media there have been reports that parents are concerned around the content of the curriculum, suggesting it is not age appropriate (BBC News, 2023). While the reforms have received critique from some parents and MPs (BBC News, 2023) academic research supports the new reforms, highlighting that good quality RSE encourages safe and healthy relationships, as well as reducing risky behaviours in teenagers (Blake & Jolly, 2002) (see section 2.5.1). In response to such concerns, the DfE have published guidance for teachers on how to explain the new reforms to parents and carers and have suggested that parents should be involved in the creation of school RSE policy documents (DfE, 2019b).

2.2.2 Role of teachers in delivering RSE

Over the years, RSE has been delivered by a wealth of professionals, including those in education and health (Pilcher, 2004), leaving Government officials questioning who should take responsibility for delivering RSE (Hampshire, 2005). Alldred (2018) suggested that youth workers, instead of teacher and health professionals, hold a unique position as they can offer informative, youth-centred conversations about sex and relationships. Although research exists which suggests external educators are preferable, the current reforms place the onus on teachers to deliver statutory school-based curriculum content.

To support teachers and educators, the DfE have published guidance on how to plan and structure lessons (DfE, 2020) and have produced materials for senior leadership staff on how to train teachers to deliver the curriculum (DfE, 2021a). Additional resources and guidance have also been made available for teachers through the PSHE Association (PSHE, 2018) and the NSPCC. Example resources include: 'It's Not OK' - a resource to support CYP aged 11 years and older to identify elements of both positive and unhealthy relationships; 'Love Life' - a differentiated resource for CYP with SEND; and 'AGENDA' - a campaign based on principles including social justice, inclusivity, equality and children's rights.

2.2.3 RSE curriculum content

As alluded to in the literature above, there has been, and continues to be, contention around what is deemed 'appropriate' and 'moral' to teach CYP as part of RSE. Some academics suggest that RSE should encourage abstinence by teaching CYP to deny sexual impulses (Hirst, 2004) while others argue that RSE should provide a safe environment for CYP to acquire sexual knowledge (Hottois & Milner, 1975; Pilcher, 2004; Thomson, 1994).

It could be inferred from the literature and policy guidance, that up until 2017, the curriculum content for secondary aged pupils adopted a moralistic stance in which abstinence was encouraged. This is evidenced by documentation published in 2000 (DfEE, 2000) which repeatedly emphasised marriage as a 'building block for community and society' and suggested that delayed sexual intercourse may prevent unplanned pregnancies.

Conversely, the reformed curriculum appears to be more progressive, aligning closer to the Education Act (Education Act, 2011). The reformed curriculum covers five main themes: 'Families and people who care for me', 'Caring friendships', 'Respectful relationships', 'Online relationships', and 'Being safe'. The curriculum aims to educate CYP about; (1) family

life, raising children, marriage, and civil partnerships; (2) establishing and preserving relationships; (3) elements of healthy and safe relationships; (4) how relationships may impact on wellbeing, mental and physical health. The curriculum has been designed sequentially, with key themes and messages taught in primary schools later developed in secondary school. The sequential nature of the curriculum reflects wider literature which recognises the importance of providing an education which reflects the age and maturity of CYP, so CYP can make educated and informed sexual decisions (Thomas & Aggleton, 2016).

The new curriculum also appears to be sensitive to the individual needs of a greater number of CYP. The guidance reflects the 2010 Equality Act (DfE, 2014b), emphasising that schools should deliver age-appropriate content which is sensitive to the individuals needs of CYP. It encourages teachers and educators to use resources which reflect a range of cultures, races, disabilities, gender identities and sexualities. Unlike previous legislation, it appreciates and celebrates different family compositions, such as adoptive parents, foster carers and same sex parents (DfE, 2019a).

2.2.4 Teaching sexual consent as part of the RSE curriculum

As part of the new RSE curriculum, it is now mandatory to teach consent and healthy sexual relationships to secondary aged CYP (Greening, 2017). The integration of consent within the curriculum feels timely, as it reflects the social and sexual landscape of CYP, and recent movements such as #MeToo and #Timesup, which have placed issues such as sexual harassment and consent in the political and public eye (Whittington, 2019b).

Teaching consent as part of the RSE curriculum has been recognised as a progressive step although its' importance and relevance has been raised by researchers, academics and professional bodies for several years (Carmody, 2015; Gilbert, 2018). In 2014, the PSHE Association, Brook (a charity who support CYP with sexual health and wellbeing), and the SEF published guidance which suggested that CYP should be 'taught all aspects of the law and sexual consent' (Brook et al., 2014). The document proposed that CYP should 'get' rather than 'give' consent, and that 'mutual consent' should be sought through 'positive and active communication'. Within schools, teaching should go beyond consent as a binary 'yes' or 'no' and instead explore the nuances and ambiguity around the process of sexual negotiation (these themes will be explored further in section 2.4.1).

Recommendations to teach about consent were also raised by Coy and colleagues (Coy et al., 2013). Their study gathered information from CYP through individual interviews, focus groups and online surveys. Their report published specific recommendations on how to improve CYP's understanding of sexual consent by: (1) ensuring CYP understand the meaning of consent through the RSE curriculum; (2) understanding that consent goes further than saying 'yes' or 'no', (3) working with adolescents around boundaries of consent, and (4) working with CYP to understand the consequences of sharing sexual images without consent.

The reformed RSE curriculum attempts to address these recommendations by ensuring secondary aged CYP have a comprehensive understanding of how to communicate consent, interpret consent, and navigate sexual situations (Brady & Lowe 2020; Bragg et al., 2020; DfE, 2019a; Harris, 2018; Whittington, 2021). The RSE curriculum is considered to play a significant role in CYP's understanding of consent (Setty, 2021). Consent will be explored further within section 2.4.

2.2.5 Summary of the secondary RSE curriculum in 2023

Within this section of the chapter, the researcher has presented information on the reformed RSE curriculum. Teaching of RSE is now a statutory requirement for secondary schools as part of the wider PSHE curriculum. By situating RSE within PSHE, the ambiguity of the curriculum recognised within the first section of the chapter (pre-2017) has been addressed. The statutory reforms have recognised and outlined the responsibility of teachers in delivering a comprehensive and inclusive curriculum which should teach timely topics such as sexual consent and healthy relationships. The reforms have also clarified the rights of parents, carers and YP over the age of 16 in accessing RSE.

Thus far the chapter has provided a historical overview of the development of RSE. The voice of educators, advocates, researchers, policy makers and parents has been captured within these sections, however thus far, there has been little recognition of the voice of CYP. The following section will therefore aim to give a voice to the CYP who are in receipt of school based RSE.

2.3 CYP views of RSE

The follow section of this chapter will give voice to the CYP who are in receipt of school based RSE. Understanding the experiences of CYP is important when attempting to inform

good quality RSE (Elia, 2000). The section will begin by summarising two worldwide syntheses in the literature, to contextualise CYP's voices within a global setting. A qualitative, Systematic Literature Review (SLR) will then follow answering, '*What can the literature tell us about secondary aged CYP's (11-16 years old) experiences of school based RSE in England?*'

2.3.1 Worldwide findings of school based RSE

In 2016, Pound and colleagues (Pound et al., 2016) conducted a synthesis of 55 qualitative studies from around the world. The synthesis included studies from the UK and Ireland, as well as Australia, New Zealand, the USA, Canada, Japan, Sweden, Brazil and Iran. Participants included those in full time education (4-19 years old) as well as young adults under the age of 25. By undertaking an inductive, interpretive meta-ethnography, the researchers arrived at two overarching conclusions. Firstly, they concluded that schools failed to recognise the unique and complex nature of RSE. Secondly, they concluded that educators denied that some CYP were sexually active. In line with findings from the Ofsted 2013 report, CYP voiced that the curriculum content did not reflect their lived experiences. CYP voiced that the curriculum content was often gendered, heterosexist and negative, with few opportunities to discuss consensual, healthy relationships and positive sexual experiences. Male students appeared to feel that they had to conceal a lack of sexual experiences, while females were at risk of sexual harassment if they participated in lessons. CYP generally felt unable to speak to staff due to lack of anonymity. CYP favoured delivery of RSE by 'experts'. Non-teaching staff were preferable as they could set clear boundaries and address 'embarrassing' topics that school staff appeared hesitant to deliver. Largely CYP also felt their teachers were 'unskilled'.

In 2019, McCann and colleagues (2019) conducted a review of papers which had focused specifically on the experiences of CYP with SEND. Their review included 1 paper from the UK, as well as papers from the USA, Australia, Ireland and Sweden. They concluded that in general, CYP with SEND benefited from RSE. However, while some CYP felt that RSE improved their knowledge and decision-making capacities, for some, the abstract nature of RSE meant accessing already complex and sensitive topics became increasingly challenging. Similarly, to Pound and colleagues (2016), the review highlighted that there were few opportunities for CYP to explore the fundamentals of positive and meaningful relationships,

and few opportunities for educators to measure outcomes and the improvement of knowledge.

The findings from these two worldwide syntheses highlight the importance of school based RSE in supporting CYP to acquire sexual knowledge. As schools are uniquely positioned to provide a safe and supportive environment, the school setting is thought to be the ideal place to support CYP to navigate their sexual views and preferences (Mercer et al., 2013). However, the findings from these syntheses suggest that current provision regarding RSE across the globe requires some improvement (Department of Health, 2013; Martinez & de Meza, 2007). It is important CYP receive a comprehensive RSE education, so they are able to make well informed and responsible sexual decisions (DfEE, 2000).

While there have been several worldwide systematic reviews which have summarised the views of CYP regarding their RSE, to date, the researcher of the current study is unaware of any systematic reviews which have focused explicitly on the experience of secondary age students (aged 11-16) in England. The researcher conducted scoping searches of the literature, using commonly accepted psychology and education databases to validate this conclusion. To inform the aims and research questions of the current study, the researcher has chosen to summarise what is already known about this unique population by conducting a qualitative SLR. As the current study will explore the experiences of secondary aged pupils, literature gathered within this review will be used to inform the current research findings.

2.3.2 Qualitative SLR
2.3.2.1 Objectives
A SLR was conducted to better understand CYP's (aged 11-16) perceptions and experiences of school based RSE in England. Qualitative studies were favoured for the review as qualitative data has been previously successful in providing detailed first-hand accounts of what CYP find helpful about school based RSE (Blake, 2008). Qualitative studies were also favoured as they offer a platform for CYP to be heard; advocating and empowering for the voice of CYP within RSE research is particularly important as CYP's voices are often thought to be marginalised within this area of research (Aggleton et al., 2000; Strange et al., 2006). The importance of CYP's voices will be discussed later in the chapter (see section 2.5.2).

2.3.2.2 Research Question

The researcher aimed to address to following research question: *What can the literature tell us about secondary aged CYP's (11-16 years old) experiences of school based* RSE *in England?*

2.3.2.3 Methods

A systematic review of the literature was undertaken, following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher et al., 2009). The researcher searched four main databases in July 2022. The four databases were selected as they offered journals within the fields of Psychology and Education. The databases were: Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), Web of Science, PsycINFO and Sociological Abstracts. An additional hand search was conducted using the 55 papers included in Pound and colleagues' (2016) review.

2.3.2.4 Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria required:

I.   primary research published between 2000 and 2022 within peer-reviewed journals

II.   studies conducted in England and written in English

III. studies which focused on CYP's (secondary school aged, 11-16 years) perceptions of the school based RSE

IV. qualitative data collected directly from CYP

Rationale for the inclusion and exclusion criteria can be found in Appendix 1.

2.3.2.5 Search Strategy

The following search terms were applied to address the range of terminology used to describe school based RSE. Studies were selected by combining terms using the 'AND' or 'OR' operator. An asterisk was used to retrieve words with alternative endings. Since the initial search brought many unrelated studies, search terms were also grouped using speech marks. Papers were limited to include search terms identified within the abstracts and/or title of the articles.

"sex* and relationship* education" OR "relationship* and sex* education" OR "sex* education" OR "relationship* education" OR "sex* health education"

AND "child*" or "young people*" or "adolescen*" or "teenager*"

AND "UK" or "Engl*" or "Brit*"

2.3.2.6 Data Extraction

The search criteria followed the PRISMA flowchart, see Figure 1. A total of 481 articles were identified from four databases and from the hand search. Once duplicates were removed using the referencing software EndNote, 370 articles remained. Titles and abstracts were screened based upon the predefined inclusion criteria. A further 334 articles were excluded, leaving 36 for full text screening. Studies were excluded if they:

   I.   focused explicitly on RSE in relation to sexual activities, intimate relationships, teenage pregnancy, sexual health behaviours, sexual violence, consent or HIV/AIDS

  II.   evaluated an RSE intervention or programme

 III.   explored teacher, parent, peer or school nurse perceptions

  IV.   included CYP under 11 years and over 16 years (e.g., studies where participants were aged 13-18 and data could not be separated by age were also excluded)

   V.   did not generate qualitative data

  VI.   used data collected from the same data set

An additional 32 articles were excluded (for rationale see Appendix 2), leaving four papers which met the inclusion criteria.

Figure 1. A figure detailing the PRISMA (Moher et al., 2009) flowchart.

```
  ┌──────────┐ ┌──────────────┐ ┌──────────┐ ┌──────────────────┐
  │  ERIC    │ │Web of Science│ │PsychINFO │ │Sociological      │
  │2000-2022 │ │  2000-2022   │ │2000-2022 │ │Abstracts         │
  │61 Citation(s)│ │126 Citation(s)│ │208 Citation(s)│ │2000-2022       │
  └──────────┘ └──────────────┘ └──────────┘ │86 Citation(s)    │
                                              └──────────────────┘
```

370 Non-Duplicate Citations Screened

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria Applied → 334 Articles Excluded After Title/Abstract Screen

36 Articles Retrieved

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria Applied → 32 Articles Excluded After Full Text Screen | 0 Articles Excluded During Data Extraction

4 Articles Included

2.3.2.7 Quality Appraisal

A quality appraisal tool was used to evaluate the four studies' strengths and weaknesses. The quality of the four research studies was assessed using Gough's (2007) Weight of Evidence (WoE). WoE is used to assess how much weight should be given to the evidence of a study within a systematic review. The terms will be discussed in turn below. All papers received a WoE score from A to C; overall scores were then used to calculate WoE D.

WoE A – CASP

WoE A involves an assessment of the internal quality, trustworthiness and coherence of a study in relation to a specific quality criterion. Within this review the four studies were assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2017) to provide a WoE A score. The CASP is a tool commonly used in reviews of qualitative evidence. The framework consisted of 10 questions with additional prompts (see Appendix 3). No adaptations were made to the CASP. Studies were scored: Yes (+), Cannot tell (?) or No (-). To calculate a numeric figure for WoE A, initial codes were transformed using guidance outlined by

Kanavaki and colleagues (2016). Studies were rated high quality (3) if they met 8 of the 10 criteria; medium quality (2) if they met 5-7 of the criteria; and low quality (1) if they met 4 or fewer of the criteria. The CASP and WoE A scores can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. A Table to show the Critical Appraisal of Studies (2007) and Weight of Evidence A (Gough, 2007)

CASP Checklist	Strange et al. (2003)	Forrest et al. (2004)	Hirst (2004)	Sundaram & Sauntson (2016)
Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	+	-	-	+
Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	+	+	+	+
Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	?	+	+	+
Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	-	-	+	+
Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	+	?	+	+
Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	-	-	-	?
Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	+	-	-	+
Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	?	?	-	?
Is there a clear statement of findings?	+	+	+	+
How valuable is the research?	+	+	+	+
Weight of Evidence A	**2**	**1**	**2**	**3**

WoE B – Appropriateness of Method

The four studies were assessed for the appropriateness of their method in relation to answering the SLR research question (Gough, 2007). Based on the inclusion criteria applied, only studies which collected the voice of CYP directly in the form of a qualitative measure were selected. Studies were rated high (3) if they solely used in-depth interviews or focus groups; medium (2) if they used an additional method of data collection (e.g., quantitative

questionnaire data - excluded for the purpose of this review) in addition to interviews or focus groups; and low (1) if they used a method of data collection other than interviews or focus groups to elicit qualitative data.

WoE C - Appropriateness of Review Question

The four studies were assessed for the appropriateness of their study topic in relation to answering the SLR research question (Gough, 2007). The studies were evaluated in relation to the following criteria: '*the extent to which the focus of the study was on CYP's perceptions of school based RSE*'. Studies were rated high (3) if they focused entirely on school based RSE, medium (2) if most of the focus was on school based RSE; and low (1) if they had a limited focus on school based RSE.

WoE D – Overall Score

The overall scores for WoE A- C were combined to give a mean judgement score used as a quality measure. Studies were rated high quality (3) if they scored 3 or above; medium quality (2) if they scored between 2 and 3; and low quality (1) if they scored 1.99 or below. Overall scores can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. A table to show the studies Weight of Evidence (Gough, 2007) from A-D

Authors & Date	WoE A	WoE B	WoE C	WoE D
Strange et al. (2003)	2	2	3	2.33
Forrest et al. (2004)	1	1	3	1.67
Hirst (2004)	2	3	2	2.33
Sundaram & Sauntson (2016)	3	2	2	2.33

2.3.2.8 Data Synthesis

Since the review was exploratory, an interpretive approach was taken, allowing data patterns to be explored (Gough et al., 2013). Thematic synthesis was adopted to analyse and synthesise the data (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The three stage research process began by coding the four result sections. Each line of the results section was applied a code based on its content and semantic (surface level) meaning. This process created a total of 51 initial codes. The codes generated were then grouped into seven descriptive themes which expressed similar concepts. The researcher took an indicative approach to data analysis, whereby themes were generated by data rather than a deductive approach which would have involved using pre-existing theory to organise the data. The third step of the synthesis

involved organising the seven descriptive themes into two higher order analytical categories. A copy of the thematic synthesis can be found in Appendix 4. A detailed description of the analytical and descriptive themes can be found in section 2.3.2.10.

2.3.2.9 Summary of the studies included in the SLR

Four papers published in peer review journals, dating from 2003 to 2016, were included in the SLR. Table 3 details the characteristics of the studies. All but one study (Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016) included male and female participants. Participants ranged from 13-16 years of age. One of the studies was qualitative and three were mixed methods in design; qualitative data was extracted from the mixed methods studies.

Table 3. Overview of studies included in the Systematic Literature Review

Author and year	Paper title	Research aims	Participant characteristics	Country	Methodology	Data analysis	Outcomes and key themes
Strange et al. (2003)	Mixed-sex or single-sex sex education: how would young people like their sex education and why?	RQ1: Preferences for single-sex or mixed-sex classes RQ2: How perceptions of SRE content influences responses to lessons RQ3: How interactions about sexual health differs in single and mixed groups	A sample of 3347 young people 1595 females 1752 males Aged 15 to 16	England	15 semi structured focus groups	Themes independently categorised and jointly interpreted	Single and mixed sex classes, teacher characteristics, curriculum content, teaching methods, influence of age, language used by students
Forrest et al. (2004)	What do young people want from sex education? The results of a needs assessment from a peer-led sex education programme.	RO: To improve the evidence base for effective sexual health education	A sample of 4353 young people 2155 females 2198 males Aged 13 to 14	England	2259 questions collected via a 'suggestion box'	Questions collated under questionnaire headers, developed into categories, and jointly interpreted	More content needed on: STD, HIV & AIDS, act of sex, emotional aspects of sex, medical advice, pregnancy, contraception, biological development, sexual pressures, LGBT+ relationships

Hirst (2004)	Researching young people's sexuality and learning about sex: experience, need, and sex and relationship education.	RO: To understand the context and diversity of young people's sexual practice	15 young people 11 females 4 males Aged 15–16 years	England	4 focus groups 15 unstructured small group and individual conversations lasting 60 minutes	No information given	Experiences differ from content, connotations of risky behaviour, lack of sexual terminology, differentiation of content, valuing students' knowledge, pleasure
Sundaram & Sauntson (2016)	Discursive silences: using critical linguistic and qualitative analysis to explore the continued absence of pleasure in sex and relationships education in England	RO: Views on SRE provision	4 females Aged 14 years	England	3 semi structured focus groups held over 5 months	Narrative analysis	Pleasure, sexual performance, gender expectations, experiences of sexual assault, pressure on females, language used by students and teachers, curriculum content, teaching styles

2.3.2.10 Thematic Synthesis

Through a SLR the researcher aimed to address to following research question: *What can the literature tell us about secondary aged CYP's (11-16 years old) experiences of school based RSE in England?* Four papers were included in the thematic synthesis, detailing the experiences of CYP aged 13-16 years. The thematic synthesis identified two analytical themes and several descriptive themes. The overarching analytical themes were: '*Pressures on CYP'* and '*Teaching Pedagogies*'. Figure 2 demonstrates themes within a thematic map. The following section will present the thematic synthesis alongside additional literature, to allow experiences to be situated within a wider contextual understanding of CYP experiences.

Figure 2. A thematic map detailing analytical and descriptive themes.
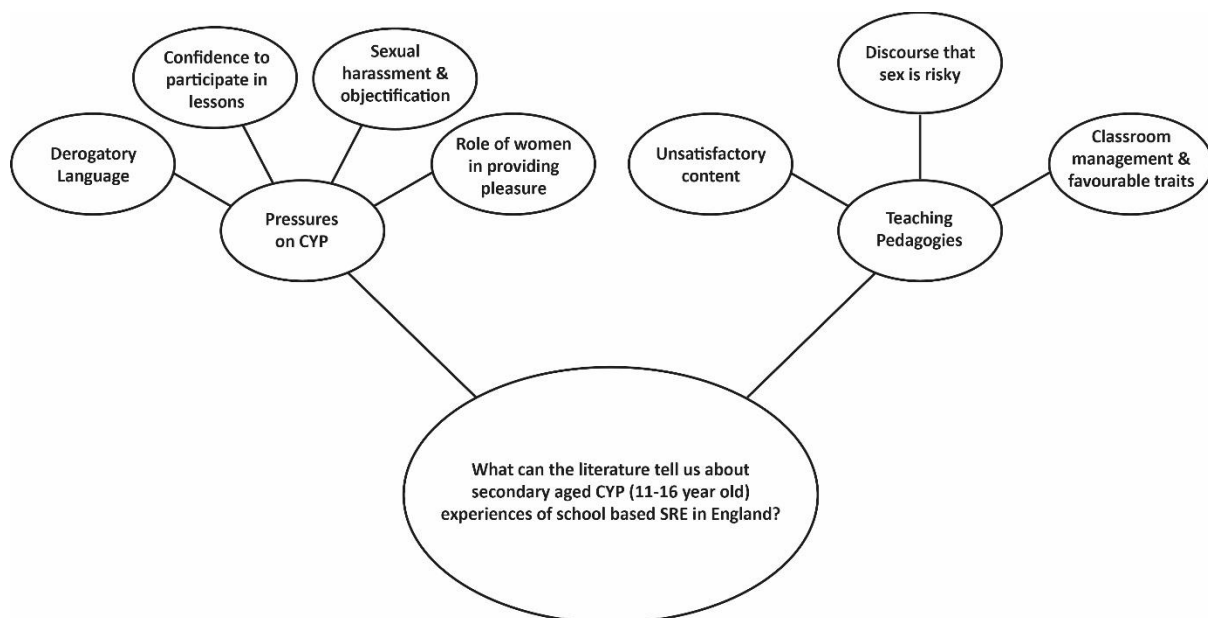
Main theme: Pressures on CYP

The first analytical theme evidenced within the SLR was termed '*Pressures on CYP'*. The theme captured CYP's experiences of pressures within RSE lessons, shaped by curriculum content and peer influences. Pressures extended to contexts outside the learning environment, whereby CYP reflected on pressures within the wider school community and society. Pressures appeared to have a detrimental impact on engagement with learning as well as CYP's confidence to discuss topics and seek support around healthy, consensual sex and relationships.

Derogatory language

Derogatory and discriminatory language was used by male and female students within the review, and wider literature (Endendijk et al., 2020; Haggis & Mulholland, 2014; Measor et al., 2000). The synthesis demonstrated that females who showed a positive interest in sex during RSE lessons were often termed 'slags', 'stupid', 'tarts', 'slappers', 'dirty' and 'sluts' (Strange et al, 2003; Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016). Such terminology was also used to describe sexually active females and was furthermore used in comments relating to clothing and appearance (Strange et al, 2003; Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016).

The language used to describe female students within RSE lessons also appeared to impact on their reputation outside lessons and within the wider school community. One participant reported 'they'll sort of get stuck with whatever they're saying for the rest of their life' (Strange et al, 2003). Some females also shared frustrations around terminology being used inaccurately, with one young person quoting 'they don't really know what it (slut) means, so that really annoys me' (Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016).

The wider literature recognises that RSE may be the ideal platform to challenge such derogatory language, also termed 'slut-shaming' (Gillander Gådin & Stein, 2019). This is important as both male and female students asked for information on how to deal with derogatory name calling in school settings (Forrest et al., 2004). RSE has been deemed an appropriate lesson to address issues of power and gender inequality (Gillander Gådin & Stein, 2019). Addressing such language is important as negative experiences have been linked to poor school performance, depressive symptoms and a decreased sense of school belonging (Hatchel et al., 2018; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2018). To address 'slut shaming', research has suggested that RSE lessons should promote a safe learning environment in which teachers take responsibility for challenging such issues (Gillander Gådin & Stein, 2019).

Confidence to participate in lessons

The review highlighted that CYP lack confidence to participate in RSE lessons, a finding supported by Van Teijlingen and colleagues (2007). Within RSE lessons it was noted that females who voiced an overt interest in the RSE curriculum were often vulnerable to negative sexual status in school (Strange et al, 2003; Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016). In

response, females were understood to tailor their sexual identity and behaviours so as not to be branded 'ready' for sex or 'the right ones' (Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016).

Female students also felt hesitant to contribute and participate in RSE lessons due to a risk of being ridiculed and teased particularly by male peers (Strange et al, 2003). One female student questioned 'Why do boys laugh when you talk about sex?' (Forrest et al., 2004). Confidence to participate appeared to be linked to maturity. Less 'academically able' students were deemed as immature, 'see the bottom set is less mature about things and they mess about' while older students were deemed sensible enough to talk openly about sex (Strange et al., 2003). The wider literature recognises that teachers of RSE should be aware and sensitive to students' increasing maturity (Unis & Sällström, 2020) and as such adapt provisions and materials accordingly (Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2012).

The wider literature recognises that RSE can elicit strong emotional reactions in students, including feelings of embarrassment, vulnerability and anxieties relating to participation (Pound et al., 2016). If not managed appropriately by teachers, emotions may manifest into disengagement (Buston et al., 2002). The synthesis highlights the importance of supporting engagement and participation. Within the classroom this could be achieved by creating an environment in which students feel emotionally safe and supported (Blake, 2004).

Sexual harassment and objectification

Students discussed their experiences of sexual harassment and objectification, something the wider literature has noted students are experiencing more frequently within school settings (Hatchel et al., 2018). Within the review it was understood that females felt pressured by male peers to act on sexual advances (Strange et al., 2003; Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016). Female students discussed sexual harassment during RSE lessons with one student voicing 'the boys start touching ya… like trying to get your bra undone' (Strange et al., 2003). Several students also recalled experiences of sexual harassment outside of RSE lessons. One student voiced 'it's part of their everyday school experience' (Strange et al, 2003) while another explained 'I have been forced to touch my lover even if I didn't want to' (Forrest et al., 2004).

Within RSE lessons students asked for information on sexual consent, rape, sexual assaults and healthy relationships (Hirst, 2004). The experiences of students within the review are

not unique, with Coleman and Testa (2007) noting a greater need for information on consent and healthy sexual relationships. Students also asked for information on how to cope with pressure from a partner and how to manage societal and peer pressure, particularly when alcohol is involved (Forrest et al., 2004; Hirst, 2004; Strange et al., 2003; Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016).

There was a narrative held by female students suggesting it was their responsibility to protect themselves from unsafe sex and non-consensual sex. One student voiced, 'if they touch, I just turn round and hit them' (Strange et al., 2003). In response to this, girls expressed views that male students should receive greater levels of RSE. Another student voiced 'it is the guys essentially raping the girls, so they should be taught not to do it' (Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016). The synthesis highlights the need to tackle sexual harassment within the school setting; some students felt this may be achieved by offering single sex rather than mixed sex RSE classes (Strange et al, 2003).

Role of women in providing pleasure

Within RSE lessons female students highlighted a gender discourse around pleasure and the role of women in providing pleasure to male partners (Hirst, 2004; Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016). Female students associated pleasure with words such as 'performing' and 'doing' to seek 'approval' (Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016). Students described a gender curriculum in which pleasure was perceived as 'natural' for males (Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016). Male students appeared confident to discuss pleasure, while female students were left feeling anxious (Hirst, 2004; Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016). One female student voiced, 'How are you meant to admit ya like it? Teachers would think you're a slag' (Hirst, 2004).

There was an agreement by students that pleasure was absent from the RSE curriculum, particularly in relation to females (Hirst, 2004; Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016). Across the four studies students asked for more information on mutual masturbation, female pleasure and foreplay (Forrest et al., 2004; Hirst, 2004; Strange et al., 2003; Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016).

Main theme: Teaching Pedagogies

The second analytical theme evidenced within the SLR was termed '*Teaching Pedagogies'*. The theme captured CYP's experiences of a curriculum which for many did not feel 'fit for purpose'. CYP spoke about teaching content, teaching delivery and the role of educators in facilitating successful RSE lessons.

Unsatisfactory content

RSE curriculum content was described by many students as 'irrelevant' and 'repetitive' (Strange et al., 2003; Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016). Students expressed concerns that teaching content differed across schools and classes (Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016) and many felt the quality of lessons did not provide them with adequate sexual knowledge or the skills required to navigate sexual situations (Forrest et al., 2004; Hirst, 2004; Strange et al., 2003). Some students expressed a need for earlier teaching of RSE (Hirst 2004; Strange et al., 2003), a finding recognised within the wider literature (Alldred, 2007; Hilton, 2007; Pound et al., 2016).

Students found the RSE curriculum highly gendered and heteronormative (Forrest et al., 2004; Hirst, 2004; Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016). Students criticised RSE lessons for focusing heavily on anatomy and the biological components of sex rather than exploring topics such as relationships, safety and respect (Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016). These findings align with the work of Formby (2011) who concluded that RSE often has a highly heteronormative agenda. The Stonewall School Report (2017) presented quantitative data which further highlighted the heteronormative RSE agenda. The report outlined that only one in five pupils in British schools had been taught about safe sex in same-sex relationships. The importance of teaching an inclusive curriculum within RSE is important when aiming to address social justice issues such as homophobia (Bradford et al., 2019; Buston & Hart, 2001)

For some students from minority ethnic and religious backgrounds, RSE lessons facilitated conversations with likeminded peers and teachers (Forrest et al., 2004) while for others, RSE lessons were deemed to marginalised minority voices (Hirst, 2004; Strange et al., 2003). Students from ethnic minority backgrounds expressed views regarding how their identities were not represented in resources used within RSE lessons. One student voiced 'there's nowt about me in sex education, it's all White' while another voiced 'suppose it's not worth bothering to put Black people in your videos or your books' (Hirst, 2004).

In general, the findings from the qualitative SLR appear to suggest the curriculum content and teaching resources fall short in representing the experiences of individuals. These findings contributed to a large-scale study conducted by the UK Youth Parliament. The study, which collected quantitative data from 21,000 young people found 40% of

participants rated their school based RSE as 'poor' or 'very poor' (Martinez & de Meza, 2007).

Discourse that sex is risky

Some students voiced that RSE focused heavily on the potential negative implications of sexual activities, such as the risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (Strange et al., 2003; Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016). Students explained that sex was portrayed as 'scary', 'risky', 'dangerous' (Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016) and therefore abstinence was favoured by teachers (Hirst, 2004; Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016).

Some students also spoke about how educational resources also added to a negative discourse around sex. Students explained that the educational videos used in RSE lessons often represented periods as 'gory' and 'unpleasant' (Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016). For female students, educational videos left them feeling objectified when female anatomy was shown. One young person voiced 'the boys just start giggling, like saying 'look at the size of them' (Strange et al., 2003).

Within RSE lessons students appeared to feel a disconnect between sexual experiences and idealised constructions (Strange et al., 2003; Hirst, 2004). One young person voiced, 'it's nowt like you thought it were gonna be, like in films and sex education lessons' (Hirst, 2004). The wider literature recognises the importance of ensuring school based RSE is relatable to CYP; one such way this can be achieved is by developing RSE programmes in partnership with CYP (Allen, 2008).

Classroom management and favourable traits

Within RSE lessons, the behaviour of male students was described by female students as disruptive to learning; females voiced that time in lessons was often wasted on discipline, '15 minutes just shouting at the boys' (Strange et al., 2003). Some male students offered explanations about their behaviour, suggesting that poor behaviour resulted from feelings of anxiety. One young person said 'some people are too scared to say things, so they cover that up by being noisy and disrupt the class' (Strange et al., 2003). To manage discipline, students favoured male teachers (Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016), adults in authority and those with good classroom control (Strange et al., 2003).

Students also felt that personal characteristics of the teacher were important (Strange et al., 2003). Favourable teachers were described as 'open' and 'fair' and took time to listen to the voice of students (Hirst, 2004; Strange et al., 2003). Within the wider literature favourable teachers have also been described as relatable role models (Allen, 2009; Goldstein et al., 2007). Trust and confidentiality were also deemed important teacher characteristics by CYP in the study and wider literature (Allen, 2009; Hirst, 2004; Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016). Lastly, favourable teachers were those who were seen as credible sources of information, 'suppose they do influence you but when it comes from teachers it sort of has more ... I dunno, ... importance' (Hirst, 2004). Within the wider literature, successful teachers have been recognised as those who understand the curriculum content and can communicate it clearly to CYP (Kehily, 2002; Schaalma et al., 2004). While teaching tools are important, ultimately the skill of teachers is felt to be more important to ensuring CYP have a successful RSE (Pound et al., 2016)

2.3.2.11 Conclusion of the SLR

The SLR aimed to explore secondary aged CYP's experiences of school based RSE in England. The four studies which collected qualitative data from students aged 13-16 in England suggested that in general, CYP perceived RSE to be unsatisfactory. Such perceived dissatisfaction is concerning given that many CYP view school as their primary source of sexual information (Newby et al., 2012).

While not conceptualised within the analytical themes, the researcher identified that across all four studies CYP voiced a preference for receiving teaching on sexual consent, rape, sexual assaults and how to manage societal, peer and partner pressure (Forrest et al., 2004; Hirst, 2004; Strange et al., 2003; Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016). The findings from the SLR reflect the voice of CYP across the world, who have asked for more information on the fundamentals of positive and meaningful relationships within RSE lessons (McCann et al., 2019; Pound et al., 2016).

The process of SLR highlighted to the researcher a lack of published, peer-reviewed research since RSE became statutory for secondary aged pupils in England (DfE, 2019a). The reader will have noted the most recent study is dated 2016. The findings from the SLR therefore highlight a need for a more current understanding of CYP's experiences of the RSE, post reforms. Such research would give insight into how the curriculum has been received by CYP

and how consent has formed part of this curriculum. Understanding how CYP receive teaching on consent is important since previous literature has highlighted that CYP can find difficulty with communicating consent (Beres, 2020; Brady et al., 2017; Cense et al., 2018; Coy et al., 2013; Whittington & Thomson, 2018). Before the researcher presents an in-depth rationale for the current study, the researcher will explore what is understood about CYP's experiences of being taught sexual consent in schools thus far.

2.4 CYP's experiences of sexual consent in schools

Within the literature there is a mutual consensus that further work should explore how CYP of statutory school age understand and define consent (Whittington, 2021; Brady et al., 2018). This section of the chapter will explore CYP's skills in communicating consent and explore what is known about how CYP received teaching on consent in schools.

2.4.1 Barriers in communicating consent

The reformed RSE curriculum aims to educate CYP on how to communicate and interpret consent and navigate sexual situations (DfE, 2019a). These skills are important as the wider literature recognises that many CYP find consent is hard to articulate (Moore & Reynolds, 2004; Whittington, 2021). Using literature and theory, the researcher will present three hypotheses offering suggestions as to why CYP find consent difficult to articulate and navigate.

2.4.1.1 Hypothesis one: Consent is poorly defined

The first potential reason as to why CYP may find it difficult to understand and navigate consent is because of the term's definition. Although there is a wealth of literature which has attempted to define the term 'sexual consent', several researchers have concluded that the term remains ill-defined (Beres, 2007; de Heer et al., 2021), ambiguous and lacking in clarity (Beres, 2020; Brady & Lowe, 2020). While the new legislation aims to teach CYP about consent, the DfE guidance does not provide a definition of consent (DfE, 2019a). It appears that the DfE guidance has adopted the definition outlined in the Sexual Offences Act (Gilbert 2018; Whittington & Thompson 2017). Under Section 74 of the Sexual Offence Act 2003 it states that '*a person consents if s/he agrees by choice and has the freedom and capacity to make a choice*' (SOA, 2003). It could therefore be hypothesised that without a clear definition of consent, or a prescribed method of how consent should be taught within

schools (Scott et al., 2020), teachers may struggle to provide CYP with the skills to communicate consent effectively.

2.4.1.2 Hypothesis Two: Miscommunication theory

The second potential reason as to why CYP may find it difficult to understand and navigate consent is based on the idea of 'miscommunication theory'. Miscommunication theory suggests that for sex to be rejected there must be a verbal 'no' exchanged by one party member (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). While there is evidence to suggest that teaching consent through a 'yes/no' model (Anderson, 2005) can prevent miscommunication (National Children's Bureau, 2014) there is also evidence to suggest that the 'yes/no' model is not always effective, as for CYP to be able to say 'no' they must have the power, confidence, competence and language skills (Burton et al., 2023; Hirsch et al., 2019). Furthermore, teaching consent through a 'yes/no' model has been deemed inappropriate as it suggests that consent has 'permanency' (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). As emphasised by the charity Childline, consent is rarely permanent, and although a person may agree to sexual activities once, it does not mean they necessarily consent in the future. The reformed curriculum aims to address miscommunication theory by teaching CYP that consent can be redacted. The curriculum also aims to upskill CYP in considering factors such as the influence of drugs and alcohol, which may impact on an individual's freedom and capacity to say 'yes / no' to sexual activities (Gilbert, 2018).

2.4.1.3 Hypothesis three: Teaching practices are disconnected from CYP's realities

The third potential reason why CYP may find it difficult to understand and navigate consent relates to teaching approaches. Ineffective teaching is thought to occur when CYP are presented with binary definitions of consent which do not relate to the nuances of their lived experiences (Brook et al., 2014; Christen & Mikkelson, 2008; Sanjakdar & Yip, 2018). Poor application of consent within real world contexts have been noted by several researchers. Whittington (2021) found that CYP find it difficult to define consent when given 'real-life' scenarios, while Setty (2021) noted that CYP view consent as multifaceted and context specific. Both studies implied that without a comprehensive understanding of consent, CYP may find it difficult to develop the competencies and skills to navigate consent within their real-world situations.

In summary, the three hypotheses begin to demonstrate some of the complexities CYP face when defining consent. Although these difficulties have been recognised, the work of Setty (2021) suggests that RSE can play a fundamental role in beginning to address such difficulties. To understand how RSE can support CYP's understanding of consent, the researcher has attempted to present literature relating to what makes effective, sexual consent education.

2.4.2 Effective sexual consent education

As discussed above (section 2.3) it is understood that CYP rarely feel skilled in dealing with the complexities of real-life sexual situations (Brook et al., 2014). As such, Whittington (2019b) proposed formalised sexual consent education should be delivered in such a way which enables CYP to apply learnt knowledge to real life contexts. For learning to be effective, resources should facilitate conversations by relating learning to real world contexts and by addressing social issues (e.g., power and gender inequalities) (Brady & Lowe, 2020).

Literature recognises that effective teaching is delivered in collaboration with CYP who are made to feel valued, skilled and knowledgeable (Lee et al., 2018). Co-production of knowledge is thought to be particularly important when discussing sensitive topics such as consent (Whittington, 2019a).

By evaluating whole-school sexual health programmes, Bragg and colleagues (2021) concluded that teaching consent requires strong skills on the part of the educator. Educators must be willing to address topics of consent (Corteen, 2017), as avoidance could be seen to marginalise CYP's rights which are protected by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Robinson, 2012; UNCRC, 1989).

Literature suggests educators should use terminology adopted by CYP; relatable terminology is thought to increase feelings of self-belonging within lessons (Bragg et al., 2020; Cense et al., 2019; Whittington & Thomson 2018). Lessons should also aim to create a safe space for CYP to develop a self-awareness (Carmody & Ovenden, 2013) and CYP should be given opportunities to seek support around sexual consent without experiencing feelings of blame, shame and guilt (Brook et al., 2014).

Delivery is understood to be most effective when educators show confidence and commitment (Bragg et al., 2021). While these elements are thought to promote effective education, several researchers have demonstrated that teachers often feel they lack the competence, confidence, time and the resources needed to produce meaningful education (Gilbert, 2018; Whittington, 2019b). Some teachers have even proposed that external services may be more skilled in delivering teaching on consent (Pound et al., 2016)

When teaching consent, teachers should be afforded appropriate time and space to deliver the curriculum (Bragg et al., 2021), and students should be given appropriate time to think critically and reflectively about such subjects. Although time is important, the fast paced nature of schools may not always allow such opportunities (National Children's Bureau, 2014).

Although the literature has outlined what makes effective sexual consent education, when exploring the literature, the researcher of the current study recognised that there have been very few qualitative studies which have explored CYP's lived experiences of being taught about sexual consent within schools. Instead, many studies aim to address sexual abuse and sexual violence through programmes and interventions (Coy et al., 2013; Whittington, 2019b; Whittington & Thomson, 2018). This finding is noteworthy and highlights a gap in the literature which the researcher aims to address by a qualitative, exploratory study, working with CYP aged 11-16. Before drawing the chapter to a close and outlining the rationale of the current research, the researcher will highlight the important of working with adolescents.

2.5 Working with adolescents – the Role of an Educational Psychologist (EP)

As the researcher of the current study aims to capture the lived experiences of CYP aged 11-16, the researcher felt it important to explore theories of adolescences development and demonstrate the importance of advocating for this unique population. Furthermore, as the research is situated within a DAEP, the researcher has chosen to draw parallels to the work of EPs who often work with this population.

2.5.1 Theories of adolescent development

EPs play a fundamental role in supporting school staff, parents, and carers to ensure CYP have access to a developmentally appropriate education (Baker, 2015). EPs help to facilitate such an education by supporting CYP and their significant adults to navigate a period of

complex emotional development during the adolescent years (Cline et al., 2015). Adolescence is a vital period of development as it is a time when CYP experience social, physical and psychological change (Ernst et al., 2006; Steinberg, 2005).

Psychological theories can be used to explore how adolescents develop and learn their ideas about sex and romantic relationships (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2004). The researcher of the current study chose to work with CYP aged 11-16 because adolescence is thought to be a 'critical period' in which norms around sexual behaviours and activities are established (WHO, 2007). The researcher has chosen to present four theories of adolescence which can used to underpin the current study.

Theories around the development of self may begin to explain how adolescents acquire knowledge. Cognitive developmental theories suggest that 'social self' develops during adolescence (Choudhury et al., 2006) while psychosocial developmental theorists suggest that during adolescence, CYP search for a sense of self and personal identity (ego identity) (Erikson, 1963).

Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Walters, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978) proposes that adolescents gather information from a range of 'information providers' and use learnt knowledge to decode social interactions (Rice & Dolgin, 2002; Spano, 2004). When learning about sex and relationships, adolescents are believed to seek information from a range of 'information providers' including, but not limited to family members, peers, friends, (social) media and teachers (Brook et al., 2014; Lader, 2009; Marston et al., 2004; Sriranganathan et al., 2010). Within the literature, it has been recognised that CYP are increasingly accessing 'virtual sex education' through social media and websites such as Instagram and TikTok (Cookingham & Ryan, 2015; Fowler et al., 2022; Sciberras & Tanner, 2023)

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model (1977) refers to the interactive factors and systems within a child's environment which can influence learning and development. Figure 3 presents a visual of the model. During adolescence the interaction and support from these systems is thought to be crucial (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). The current study aims to explore how the microsystem (e.g., school setting) influences learning, however for this to be understood holistically there must also be a consideration of factors within the mesosystem (e.g., family and X) and macrosystem (e.g., policy and legislation).

Figure 3. Ecological Framework of Development (adapted from Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).
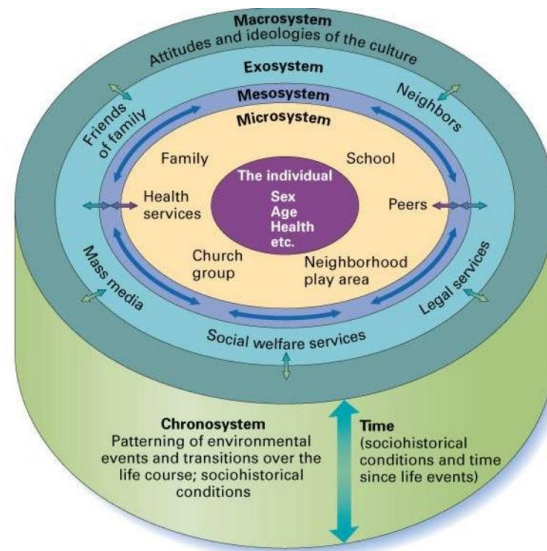
The aforementioned theories demonstrate that adolescence is a key period of development in which CYP gather information about sexual behaviours. These theories consider the role of the individual (cognitive and psychosocial theories) as well as the role of society (social learning and ecological systems). The theories further strengthen the researcher's rationale and importance of understanding the lived experiences of CYP during their teenage years.

2.5.2 Advocating for the voice of CYP

EPs play a fundamental role in advocating for the voice of CYP (Cline, Gulliford, & Birch, 2015). Key documentation such as the Farrell Report (Farrell et al., 2006) and Children and Families Act (DfE, 2014) highlight the importance of centralising CYP's voices. CYP's right are also protected by UNCRC (1989). Article 12 outlines that CYP should have the right to express themselves about issues which impact upon them. Article 17 further states that CYP should have access to information which promotes 'social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health'. However, within the literature it could be suggested that current practice fails to uphold these articles.

Regarding Article 12, within education literature, it has been recognised that CYP often feel their voices are undermined, sensationalised or silenced (Renold, Egan, & Ringrose, 2015). CYP seldom feel able to convey their experiences to those who make decisions about policies and practices (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Tisdall, 2017). Regarding Article 17, literature has suggested that schools fail to provide CYP with sufficient information on

sexual matters and few opportunities to explore positive sexual rights and self-identity (Forrest et al., 2004; Hirst, 2004; Horn, Peter & Russell, 2017; Pound et al., 2016; Strange et al., 2003; Whittington, 2019).

To address such issues, the literature states that effective RSE should involve collaborative discussions between educators and CYP, and that good quality RSE should actively seek CYP's views to inform lesson planning and teaching approaches (Elia, 2000). While some researchers have recommended that CYP should be consulted on how they hope to be taught RSE (Tobin, 2018), there is little evidence within the literature to suggest that the voice of CYP has been either gathered or acted upon.

To address these concerns, the researcher of the current study has invited CYP to actively share their lived experiences of the RSE curriculum. The researcher's ontological and epistemological position (Chapter Three) views CYP as 'experts' (Haberlang & Rogow, 2015). The researcher suggests that CYP's lived experiences are worthy of studying independently from the adult voices represented heavily within this chapter (Elia, 2000).

2.6 Rationale for present study

This chapter has explored the complex political landscape of the RSE curriculum and has highlighted a wealth of concerns regarding the effectiveness, appropriateness and standard of RSE in UK secondary schools over the past decade (DfE, 2017; Greening, 2017). To date, there have been very few qualitative studies in England which have explored CYP's experiences of the RSE curriculum. Studies which have collected qualitative date predate the reformed statutory RSE curriculum (Forrest et al., 2004; Hirst, 2004; Strange et al., 2003; Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016).

As adolescence is a key period for acquiring sexual knowledge, the researcher aims to explore the lived experiences of individuals attending secondary school settings in England. The study aims to explore RSE curriculum content and delivery and offer an understanding of how the new reforms have impacted sexual consent education.

An exploratory approach (Robson, 2011) to collected data will be adopted. Through a flexible, qualitative research design (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006) the researcher will attempt to empower the voice of CYP and begin to bridge the disconnect between CYP and policy makers (Tisdall, 2017).

The author hopes to offer a safe, confidential, supportive space for CYP to discuss teaching and learning around RSE and sexual consent. The researcher will use consultative skills (active and empathetic listening and questioning) (Nolan & Moreland, 2014) gained as a TEP to facilitate effective discussions.

The researcher will act as a scientist practitioner (Miller & Frederickson, 2006), offering real-world analytical interpretations and conclusions embedded within Education and Psychology literature (Elliott, 2000). The researcher aims to explore espoused policy and practice to offer new insights to the reader (Cahill, 2007)

Overall, the current study aims to contribute novel findings to our understanding of what makes successful RSE lessons by actively listening, empowering and advocating for the voice of CYP (Coy et al., 2013; Pound et al., 2016; Whittington, 2019b; Whittington & Thomson, 2018).

2.6.1 Research questions
The primary aim of this research is to explore CYP's (aged 11-16) experiences of school based RSE in England, with an additional focus on how CYP experience the teaching of consent, as part of the RSE curriculum. To understand the research aims, the following research questions have been developed:

Research question*: What are CYP's experiences of the RSE curriculum?*

Sub-question*: How do CYP experience the teaching of consent, as part of the RSE curriculum?*

Chapter 3 – Methodology

Chapter three aims to provide an overview of the methodology adopted by the researcher of the current study. The chapter will begin by providing a summary of the theoretical paradigms relevant to real world research. Ontological and epistemological assumptions will be explored. The researcher will present justification for undertaking Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and will provide a detailed explanation of the qualitative research design by demonstrating measures to ensure a high-quality qualitative research study. The role of stakeholders will also be considered. The chapter will conclude by presenting a description of the analytical process and ethical considerations addressed by the researcher.

3.1 Theoretical paradigms

To understand the systematic process of enquiry followed in this study (Hanson et al., 2005), real world research suggests that it is invaluable to consider the philosophical foundations upon which the research is centred (Cohen et al., 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The literature states that researchers should consider the research paradigm (a belief system, worldview, or set of principles) which guides the research process (Cohen et al., 2017). Paradigms contain philosophical assumptions which determine the theoretical framework the researcher adopts and subsequent methodological decisions (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006; Mertens, 2014).

Within psychological research, several paradigms have been recognised. These include, but are not limited to, positivism, post-positivism, post-modernism (which encapsulated interpretivism and constructionism), critical realism, pragmatism and transformative (Cohen et al., 2017; Mertens, 2014). The researcher acknowledges that there is a vast array of research paradigms which could be explored, however for the purpose of this study, the researcher has chosen to focus on positivism, constructionism, and critical realism. By exploring these paradigms, the researcher can situate her ontological and epistemological positioning in relation to the methodology adopted, RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3.1.1 Ontological and epistemological positions

Paradigms are belief systems which are underpinned by ontological and epistemological beliefs (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Cohen et al., 2017; Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

Ontology relates to the nature of reality or being (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Ontology considers whether there is a single reality or multiple realities of the phenomena being studied (Fox et al., 2007). Ontology is about '*what*' it is that we think we can know (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Ontology can be considered on a spectrum, with realism and relativism at the extremes, and critical realism situated somewhere in between. Realists suggest there is one true single, objective reality (Coolican, 2017). Relativists reject the notion of an objective reality and instead believe the world is constructed through multiple realities (Coolican, 2017).

Ontologies link closely to epistemological positioning. Epistemology can be defined as the nature of knowledge; it is about '*how*' we think we can know (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Epistemology considers how researchers understand the world through the knowledge they acquire (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Willig, 2017). Epistemology can be understood through two dominant frameworks. Positivism relies on a single reality (*ontology - realism*) and positivist researchers assume knowledge can be generated through the application of scientific methods (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Post-positivism (*ontology – relativism*) recognises that the world can only be understood imperfectly, as our perceptions are only partial (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

In research it is important the researcher's ontological and epistemological stance aligns with the research question being explored (Langdridge, 2007). The researcher will now present further explanation of three paradigms, to allow for her ontological and epistemological position to be understood in relation to the current study's research questions.

3.1.1.1 Positivism

Positivist researchers aim to provide evidence for or against an argument by seeking a scientific truth which can be measured accurately, objectively and value free (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Mertens, 2014). Positivist researchers often collect quantitative data through systematic enquiry to answer a specific research question (Abusabha & Woelfel, 2003) and offer empirically grounded conclusions (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Positivist researchers usually align with realist ontologies (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Purist realists assume there is a truth to be discovered (Braun & Clarke, 2021) which is independent of the researcher's subjective views (Tebes, 2005). Positivist researchers

typically view themselves and participants as individual entities, and therefore the researcher can study the world without adding influence (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

3.1.1.2 Post-modernism: Constructionism

Post-modernism has evolved in response to critique from positivism (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Post-modern researchers recognise that their constructions and interpretations shape the world and therefore observations cannot be pure (Haraway, 1988) and the world can only be understood imperfectly (Braun & Clarke, 2021). As such, objectivity is ultimately 'impossible' (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Within post-modernism sits constructionism.

Post-modern researchers usually align with relativist ontology (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Researchers aim to make sense of the world from the view of the individual (Mertens, 2014). Constructionists reject the notion of objectivity (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) and instead view the world as socially constructed. Constructionists are concerned with how reality is made and the implications of this (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Researchers may collect qualitative data through focus groups or interviews, to develop meaning about how an individual understands their lived experiences (Kirk & Miller, 1986). Researchers recognise there is a connection between their personal values and the research which they are conducting (Mertens, 2014).

3.1.1.3 Critical Realism

Critical realism emerged as an alternative paradigm between positivism and constructionism. Braun and Clarke (2021) suggest that critical realism is a '*contextualised*' version of realism. It combines ontological realism, the view that the truth is out there and the idea the world exists independently from our constructions and perceptions (Mertens, 2014), with epistemological relativism, the idea that it is impossible to access the truth directly, and impossible to have an objective view of the world (Maxwell, 2012).

In line with critical realism, researchers may adopt an interpretivist epistemological stance (Robson, 2011). Critical realists reject the idea that there are multiple realities, but instead accept that individuals have equally valid but different perceptions of reality (Alexander, 2006; Maxwell, 2012). Critical realists argue the truth may exist, however it can never be 'proven' because individuals view the world uniquely (Harper & Thompson, 2011). Critical realism acknowledges that individual experiences of reality are mediated by culture,

language and emotions (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Maxwell, 2012). Experiences are therefore socially located (Pilgrim, 2014).

Interpretivists often use qualitative methods to gather individuals' perspective and experiences, to allow phenomena to be understood in depth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Critical realism recognises that researchers have a distinct role in understanding and interpreting data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The research is part of the world which is being understood, and as such the researcher sits within the data collected (Pilgrim, 2014).

Some researchers have critiqued critical realism, suggesting that it is not a distinct ontology or epistemology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) because it fits between realism and relativism (Bergin et al., 2008). Others have praised critical realism as it has combined the two to provide a more advanced theoretical position (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). For the current researcher, critical realism felt an appropriate stance for her to answer the study aims and research questions. The following section therefore will situate critical realism within the current study.

3.1.2 Ontological and epistemology stance adopted by the researcher

The aim of the current study is to explore CYP's lived experiences of the RSE curriculum. The researcher aims to achieve this by collecting qualitative data through individual interviews and small focus groups. The researcher has therefore adopted a critical realist ontological position, which will allow for multiple experiences and realities to be explored from a relativist-interpretivist epistemological stance. The researcher accepts that there may be variations in CYP's views but acknowledges there may be commonalities within experiences. The researcher recognises that reality is unattainable in its purest form and that participants' lived experiences will only ever be partially understood (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The researcher recognises that her perceptions of the world are shaped by her social positioning, social contexts, and language use (Danermark et al., 2002). To ensure these reflections are captured, the researcher has engaged in a process of reflexivity throughout the study, which will be discussed further in section 3.3.3 and 3.8.2.

3.2 Theoretical positioning of RTA

Researchers with a critical realist ontology and interpretivist epistemology often adopt a qualitative methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Within the current study, qualitative data will be gathered through interviews and focus groups and analysed using RTA; critical

realism has been recognised as popular paradigm for researchers undertaking RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The following section will outline methodological decisions regarding the current study's research design in relation to the researcher's ontology and epistemology.

The broader literature recognises that to promote positive attitudes towards healthy sexual development, CYP's views and opinions should be actively listened and responded to (Aggleton et al., 2000; Strange et al., 2006). As the literature review demonstrated, CYP's views on RSE can be obtained through 'rich' anecdotes and descriptions of their lived experiences (Blake, 2008; Tong et al., 2012). Therefore, the researcher has adopted a flexible, exploratory research design which allows for 'rich' qualitative data to be collected (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006; Polkinghorne, 2005).

In the current study the researcher has utilised Braun and Clarke's (2021) RTA. RTA allows for the meanings of data to be understood through shared themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). RTA aligns closely to the researcher's ontological and epistemological positioning, as themes are constructed through the data and the researcher's theoretical assumptions (Braun et al., 2016). As such the researcher plays a unique role in the analytical interpretation of data (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). RTA has been praised as a flexible data collection tool and has been used in a wide variety of methods including focus groups and individual interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Clarke & Braun, 2013). It is also recognised as an accessible method for beginner qualitative researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021).

As the study aims to explore the lived experiences of participants, the researcher has taken an inductive approach to information exploration and thematic identification (Robson, 2011). An inductive approach allows themes to be driven by the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Patton, 1990), rather than being shaped by a theoretical framework or a pre-existing codebook (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021). Some realist researchers aim to represent their data objectively by utilising coding reliability tools. However, the current researcher has discounted such an approach as it assumes there is a '*correct*' way in which participants should view the world (Madill et al., 2000). While inductive approaches are not typically influenced by pre-existing literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006) the reader must be aware that within the current study, the researcher conducted a general search of the literature (see Chapter Two), prior to data collection and analysis. The order of work was determined by

academic deadlines. Therefore, pre-existing theoretical literature may have influenced the research questions and approach to data analysis.

As part of the methodology, the researcher had to identify whether data should be explored at a semantic or latent level. Themes expressed explicitly (*surface level*) were considered semantic while those expressed conceptually (*implicit level*) were considered latent (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Details of analytical interpretations can be found in Chapter Four. In the current study the researcher chose to explore data at a semantic level because the researcher was interested in what was explicitly voiced by participants. Given the nature of RTA, some elements of the data were also explored at a more latent level based on underlying ideas beyond those described by participants (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The researcher drew on intentional language to convey participants' unique perspectives of their realities (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Intentional language allows participants to convey their own notion of the 'truth'. Intentional theorisation of language was deemed appropriate as it is loosely underpinned by a critical realist ontology and a post-positivist epistemology (Fleetwood, 2014).

3.2.1 Alternative methodologies rejected by the researcher

While the researcher believes RTA was the most appropriate method to address the aims of the study, other methodologies were considered. A summary of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, Discourse Analysis, Grounded Theory and Narrative Approaches are presented below, alongside justifications as to why these methodologies were rejected.

Similar to TA, ***Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)*** aims to understand the lived experiences of individuals while accounting for the role of the researcher. IPA seeks to generate a description of individual experiences but, in this method, the role of the researcher is to interpret the meaning of these experiences within a wider social context (Smith, 2004). Individuals' lived experiences are therefore used to inform and understand others' experiences (Larkin et al., 2006). IPA was rejected as a method because it aims to provide a detailed examination of a small number of lived experiences rather than exploring more generally the lived experiences of a collective group (Harper & Thompson, 2011). IPA has also been critiqued as a complex method which focuses heavily on language use (Willig, 2017). As the researcher aimed to analysis data at a semantic level, the researcher did not feel this was an appropriate method.

Like IPA, *Discourse Analysis* involves a detailed evaluation of language (Parker, 2005), whereby language is used to give meaning to events, relationships, and situations (Potter, 1996). Discourse Analysis focuses on how language can be used to understand individual realities (Starks & Brown-Trinidad, 2007). While the researcher of the current study was interested in the language used by participants, as a method, Discourse Analysis was rejected because the researcher felt it would not provide a sufficiently detailed understanding of the lived experiences of participants. Discourse Analysis was further rejected as it is typically suited to data gathered through naturalistic exchanges rather than interviews which were central to the current study (Harper & Thompson, 2011). Although Discourse Analysis can align with a critical realist stance, in this instance it was rejected due to its social constructionist philosophy (Harper & Thompson, 2011).

Grounded Theory was considered as it explores commonalities between lived experiences which some have suggested provides greater insight and understanding (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). However, Grounded Theory was rejected as it does not reflect the researcher's epistemology, instead aligning more closely with objectivism (Levers, 2013). As Grounded Theory aims to produce theories from the data set (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), the researcher further rejected the method, suggesting it would not afford sufficient exploration of lived experiences.

Lastly *Narrative Approaches* were considered. Narrative Approaches typically assume participants will organise their experiences into narratives or stories, with a clear beginning, middle and end (Gilbert, 2002). These narratives are then used to make meaning of lived experiences (McAdams, 1997). While Narrative Approaches fit with the flexible nature of the current study, the researcher rejected the method, as narrative analysis primarily focuses on the individual level (Lyons & Coyle, 2012). As the researcher aimed to understand common patterns of meaning, RTA instead felt more appropriate.

3.3 Evaluating the quality of qualitative research

In quantitative studies, research designs are often evaluated using measures such as reliability and validity (Collingridge & Gantt, 2008). Reliability concerns factors such as participant and observer bias and participant and observer error (Robson, 2011). Many quantitative studies also consider the effects of internal and external validity, and how generalised their research findings can be (Mertens, 2014). However, the criteria used to

evaluate quantitative research is not appropriate to evaluate qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003). Tools which evaluate the quality of qualitative research should instead reflect the paradigm in which the qualitative research is located (Merriam, 1995). Within the literature it has been suggested that academics may find it difficult to define measures of quality for qualitative research, since qualitative research is often underpinned by flexible methodologies (Yardley, 2000). Although this is the case, it is important that researchers consider how the quality of their research is upheld (Robson, 2011).

Throughout the study, the researcher has referred to, and described, how the quality of the research is upheld. To inform quality appraisal, the researcher has utilised several frameworks; several frameworks were chosen as there does not appear to be a consensus within the literature to suggest which quality appraisal tool is most appropriate. The researcher has drawn on the following frameworks:

1) Lincoln and Guba (1985) - credibility, transferability, confirmability, dependability
2) Anderson (2017) - reflexivity, coherence, transparency, transferability, ethical considerations
3) Yardley (2017) - commitment and rigour, impact and importance, sensitivity to context, transparency and coherence
4) Braun and Clarke's (2021) 15-point quality checklist

Specific terminology has been described when first introduced to the reader. Alongside quality appraisal tools, when undertaking RTA, Braun and Clarke (2021) suggest researchers must also engage in a process of reflexivity. The process of reflexivity is therefore discussed below.

3.3.1 Researcher reflexivity

Reflexivity has been deemed an important process by numerous researchers (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003; Patton, 2002) as well as being a key criterion and measure of high-quality qualitative research (Anderson, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reflexivity is embedded within the values of qualitative paradigms (Madill & Gough, 2008). Reflexivity is a process in which researchers consciously reflect on how their own experiences, beliefs and ontological and epistemological positionings influence psychological knowledge and engagement with data (Berger, 2015; Langdridge, 2007).

In qualitative research, a reflexive researcher acknowledges that they are involved in the data collection process and findings generated as part of data analysis (Berger, 2015). Reflexivity allows findings to be co-constructed from participant data and the researcher's own beliefs (Darawsheh, 2014; Shufutinsky, 2020). In RTA, the researcher's subjectivity is viewed as a primary tool and resource for analysis (Gough, 2016; Luttrell, 2019).

Recognising the role of the researcher within the study can increase methodological integrity and the transparency and credibility of the study (Berger, 2015; Levitt et al., 2017; Willig, 2017). Transparency ensures the reader has a detailed understanding of methodological decisions while credibility explores similarities between participants' accounts and the researcher's interpretation (Anderson, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Throughout the study, the researcher has considered personal reflexivity (how her values may shape research) and functional reflexivity (how the methods and design may shape the research produced) (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Robson, 2011). This felt important given the researcher's personal interest in the subject topic and accompanying subjectivity.

The researcher also kept a reflexive log (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and engaged in reflexive questioning using guidance proposed by Langdridge (2007), see Table 4. The log was used as a self-critical tool (Nowell et al., 2017) to address prior knowledge, assumptions (Nadin & Casell, 2006) and emotional responses during data collection (Cunliffe, 2016). While the researcher has engaged in reflexivity, the researcher acknowledges her thoughts can only ever be understood imperfectly (Finley, 2002). To support transparency (Anderson, 2017), an extract from the reflexive log can be found in Appendix 5.

Table 4. An example of reflexive questions (Langdridge, 2007) captured in the researcher's reflexive log.

Question	Reflexive Thoughts
Is the researcher an insider or an outsider?	The researcher would view themselves as an outsider within the study. The researcher does not have any experience of teaching the RSE curriculum, however the researcher does have a personal interest in the topic. The researcher had no prior links to stakeholders in the study; however the researcher did volunteer at several youth groups to build rapport with CYP. During this time the researcher was mindful of potential power imbalances and avoided positioning themselves as an 'expert'. The researcher acknowledges that as an outsider they were unfamiliar with some of the language used by the participants, and as such, where necessary, the researcher asked clarifying questions to avoid potential misinterpretations.
Does the researcher empathise with the participants and their experiences?	Yes, the researcher does empathise with the participants' experiences. During data collection, the researcher acknowledges that she found it very difficult to not comment on personal stories. To manage this, the researcher kept a reflexive log. To ensure participants did not feel their voices were being minimised, the researcher explained at the beginning that she would be giving very limited verbal responses; instead, affirmative sounds and non-verbal body language was used.
Who is the researcher and how might the researcher influence the research?	The researcher is a 27-year-old educated female. At the time of the study, the researcher was working as a TEP for the Local Authority (LA). The researcher had no prior connections to the youth groups in which participants were recruited. The researcher acknowledges that participants' responses may have been influenced by their own perception of the researcher, however the researcher aimed to minimise power imbalances (see above).
Why is the researcher carrying out the research?	The research was a requirement of the researcher's doctoral training. The researcher had both a professional and personal interest in the research topic. The researcher felt disgruntled with her own experience of RSE and the extent to which unhealthy relationships and non-consensual experiences appear to be increasing in society. Within the LA in which the researcher was working, the topic (unbeknown to the researcher at the time of submitting her proposal) was also part of a wider agenda to increase young people's knowledge of safe sex.

3.4. Stakeholder engagement

Before recruitment could take place, the researcher had to consider stakeholders involved within the research study. When considering the quality of qualitative research, Yardley (2017) suggested that researchers should be sensitive to ethical, theoretical and social cultural issues which may arise during the research project. To ensure best practice, the researcher identified and worked with a range of stakeholders including:

- *CYP:* so as not to be seen as an 'outsider' to the group, the researcher spent time volunteering at the youth groups and building rapport with CYP. CYP were offered the opportunity to ask questions pre and post data collection and had the autonomy to choose whether they wanted to speak to the researcher as part of a focus group or individual interview. Data was collected in a safe, confidential, and familiar setting. CYP were offered comfort breaks during data collection. Youth group staff provided a 1:1 emotional check-in with the CYP after data collection.

- *Parents and carers*: parents and carers were kept fully informed of the study aims and methods. Contact with parents and carers took place through written communication. Parents and carers were asked to consider the appropriateness of participation given the potential sensitive nature of the study topics.

- *Youth group staff*: the researcher worked closely with staff from two youth groups (see 3.5.3). Communication took place pre-, during and post- data collection through telephone and email correspondence and face to face meetings. Working with staff was important to ensure they did not act as gatekeepers (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

- *University of Nottingham*: the research project formed part of the DAEP training course. During the project the researcher was supervised by her university tutor and used tutorials to discuss ethical queries (see section 3.7).

- *LA & Educational Psychology Service (EPS)*: the research was undertaken within a LA in Yorkshire. The researcher worked closely with organisations within the council who were positioned to advocate for the voice of CYP.

3.5 Design – participants

3.5.1 Participant inclusion criteria

There were two inclusion criteria for this study. Firstly, participants needed to have had some school-based delivery on RSE and sexual consent – this allowed participants to reflect

on personal experiences. Secondly, participants had to be 11-18 years old – this allowed analytical interpretations to be linked to government legislation.

3.5.2 Participant recruitment

Given the nature of the research population, the researcher adopted a purposeful sampling strategy (Robson, 2011). To gauge preliminary interest, an email was sent to potential youth groups within the LA, detailing the study aims and research design (see Appendix 6). The researcher received an expression of interest from three youth groups who received a follow up letter (see Appendix 7). Additional questions from staff were answered via phone and email. Two of the three youth groups who showed an expression of interest agreed to support with recruitment.

Recruitment was co-constructed with youth group staff to ensure that CYP were not coerced into taking part; staff were reminded weekly of CYP's right to participate. From October to December 2022 the researcher volunteered at two separate youth groups. At each youth group the researcher volunteered once a week, for 2-3 hours a night. By volunteering, the researcher aimed to raise the profile of the study, build rapport with potential participants, and show her commitment to the CYP (Yardley, 2017).

Staff distributed information sheets to parents and carers (see Appendix 8); the document detailed the purpose of the study and participant eligibility criteria. Posters were placed around the youth group building (see Appendix 9) and the researcher delivered a short five-minute informal presentation to potential participants at the end of one of the sessions. Attendance was not compulsory. The presentation offered CYP the opportunity to ask questions and express interest. Those interested in the study received an information sheet (see Appendix 10). The information sheets encouraged CYP and parents and carers to consider the content of the study and their own personal experiences. If personal risks were identified, either by the CYP, their parents or carers, or by staff at the youth group, the CYP were unable to participate.

3.5.3 Description of the youth group settings

Youth group one comprised of seven CYP, between the ages of 11 and 14; the group had been established within the last year. Youth group two comprised of approximately 18 young people, between the ages of 15 and 18. The groups were mixed sex and included CYP from a range of schools within the LA. Recruitment from two youth groups supported the

study's transferability of findings across the LA (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Widening the recruitment pool to CYP across England would have increased transferability, however given the scope of the project and doctoral time restrictions, the researcher felt this to be unfeasible. Future studies may wish to replicate the study using a wider recruitment strategy.

3.5.4 Description of participants

Participants were asked to provide descriptive information as part of the study; an example of the form completed by participants can be found in see Appendix 11. Descriptive information is recorded in Table 5. To ensure confidentiality, real names have been redacted and replaced with a pseudonym chosen by participants.

Table 5. Descriptive information of the 15 participants who took part in the study.

Pseudonym	Age†	Preferred Pronoun	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Ethnicity	School Setting	School Composition	SEND‡
Sid	11y 6m	She/her	Female	Heterosexual	White	Mainstream	Mixed Sex	Yes
Jack	11y 10m	He/him	Male	Heterosexual	White	Mainstream	Mixed Sex	No
Lewis	12y 6m	He/him	*	*	White	Mainstream	Mixed Sex	*
Jeffery	14y 7m	He/him	Male	Heterosexual	White	Mainstream	Mixed Sex	Yes
Kevina	12y 4m	She/her	Female	Bisexual	White	Mainstream	Mixed Sex	Yes
Felix	13y 2m	He/him	Male	*	White	Mainstream	Mixed Sex	*
Sandra	16y 2m	She/her	Female	Heterosexual	White	Mainstream	Mixed Sex	No
Trevor	16y 2m	He/him	Male	Heterosexual	White	Mainstream	Mixed Sex	No
Wendy	16y 3m	She/her	Female	Bisexual	White	Mainstream	Mixed Sex	Yes
Keith	14y 5m	He/him	Male	Heterosexual	White	Mainstream	Mixed Sex	Yes
Saul	16y 3m	He/him	Male	Bisexual	White	Mainstream	Mixed Sex	No
Julie	15y 7m	She/her	Female	Heterosexual	White	Mainstream	Single Sex	No
Lila	15y 5m	She/her	Female	Heterosexual	White	Mainstream	Single Sex	No
Mia	11y 0m	She/her	Female	Heterosexual	White	Mainstream	Mixed Sex	No
Sage	12y 11m	She/her	Female	Heterosexual	White	Mainstream	Mixed Sex	No

† Age (year and month) at time of interview (calculated using date of birth and interview date)

‡ SEND – Special Educational Need or Disability

* Indicates non-disclosed information by participants

3.6 Qualitative data collection measures

The lived experiences of participants were collected through semi-structured small focus groups and individual interviews. A rationale for these tools precedes a description of the data collection measures below.

3.6.1 Justification for interviews and focus groups

As suggested by Mertens (2014), interviews are an appropriate tool to collect qualitative data and the voice of YP. Interviews can be designed in several ways: 1) 'structured' – the researcher asks predetermined questions using a structured interview schedule; 2) 'semi structured' – the researcher uses prompts and questions based on the literature and participants' responses; 3) 'unstructured' – an informal discussion is held on a topic of interest (Robson, 2011).

To answer the research question and study aims, the researcher chose a 'semi structured' approach to data collected. A semi-structured, flexible approach was favourable as it enabled the researcher to ask exploratory, open-ended questions, facilitating comfortable interaction and discussions in which 'rich' information was gathered (Smith et al., 2009). The semi-structured design offered participants autonomy to explore emergent topics of interest, without being limited or bound by the researcher's interests, thus reflecting the researcher's critical realist ontological position.

Interview designs can be used with individual participants or within group contexts (Robson, 2011). Some would argue that individual interviews are favoured, as they eliminate the chance of one participant dominating the conversation (Cohen et al., 2017), while others would suggest that focus groups are preferable, as they encourage discussions amongst participants and allow reflections to be captured in a more realistic and comfortable setting (Kitzinger, 1994).

As existing research did not indicate a best practice (Cohen et al., 2017; Kitzinger, 1994), participants were given the option to choose which data gathering technique they preferred. Those who opted for a focus group were also given autonomy to choose which participants they would like to form the wider group. The researcher hoped by giving participants autonomy, the study would be deemed ethically sensitive to individual needs (Yardley, 2017).

3.6.2 Developing the interview schedule

The interview schedule was developed by drawing upon guidance from wider literature (Robson, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). To foster feelings of comfort (Smith et al., 2009) the interviews began by asking a preliminary question unrelated to the research topic: *'Can you tell me one thing you enjoy doing when you come to the youth group?'*.

Throughout the individual interviews and focus groups, a range of questioning styles were used (Breen, 2006; Krueger & Casey, 2015). A broad, introductory question (Robson, 2011) cued participants into the research topic: *'Can you tell me about your experiences of the relationship and sex education curriculum in school to date?'* while more traditional questions allowed the researcher to explore pertinent topics recognised and explored within the literature review. Topics of interest were used to answer the study aims and research questions. Topics included curriculum content, teaching approaches, teacher characteristic, classroom expectations, classroom composition and pupil behaviour. The flexibility of the approach allowed the researcher to further explore topics important to YP, which may not have received sufficient weighting in the original exploration of the literature.

The interviews and focus groups concluded by offering CYP the opportunity to comment on any topics which had not previously been discussed (Breen, 2006; Krueger & Casey, 2015). Participants were asked, '*Is there anything else you would like to mention that we have not discussed today?'*. This question also allowed discussions to come to a natural close (Robson, 2011). To support transparency of the study (Yardley, 2017), a copy of the semi-structured interview schedule can be found in Appendix 12.

In line with the theoretical basis of RTA, during the creation of the interview schedule the researcher considered her use of language and terminology. To minimise negative emotional responses and the likelihood of participant distress, the researcher attempted to use impartial language and phraseologies. The researcher also discussed the schedule with her supervisor and submitted a copy as part of the ethical approval process.

3.6.3 Carrying out the semi-structured interviews and focus groups

Once written consent had been sought, a date for data collection was arranged. For convenience, data collections took place on the night CYP attended the youth groups. CYP were asked to choose whether they preferred a focus group or interview, ahead of the pre-

agreed date. Details of the dates in which data collection took place, and the composition of the focus groups, can be found in Table 6.

Table 6. A table detailing the dates and composition of focus groups and individual interviews.

Date	Interview or Focus Group	Participants
29/10/22	Focus Group 1	Sid, Jack, Lewis, Jeffery & Kevina
03/11/22	Individual Interview 1	Felix
16/11/22	Focus Group 2	Sandra, Trevor, Wendy, Keith & Saul
17/11/22	Focus Group 3	Julie, Lila
25/11/22	Individual Interview 2	Mia
26/11/22	Individual Interview 3	Sage

Prior to data collection the researcher ensured: 1) there was a quiet and confidential room available; 2) a member of staff was available to participants if they needed to seek support; 3) a member of staff was identified as a designated safeguarding lead in case of a safeguarding disclosure.

At the beginning of the interviews and focus groups, participants provided demographic information and assigned themselves a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were reminded of the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw (see section 3.7.6). Participants were reminded to only share information they felt comfortable sharing. Participants were reminded that information discussed would remain confidential unless a disclosure was made (see section 3.7.5). Participants involved in the focus groups were also asked to co-create and agree to a confidentiality and privacy agreement (see section 3.7.2).

During the interviews and focus groups participants were asked a series of semi-structured questions (see section 3.5.2). To support the credibility of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and ensure a comprehensive understanding, the researcher asked clarifying questions and summarised participants' responses where necessary. This was particularly important when participants used slang terminology. To elicit further in-depth discussions and reflections, the researcher asked extension questions such as '*can you tell me more about...?*' (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Parker, 2005).

The researcher offered participants a comfort break and provided an emotional check-in halfway through data collection. Interviews were audio recorded (see section 3.6.3). Interviews and focus groups lasted between 27 minutes and 47 seconds, and 55 minutes and 7 seconds. In total, 3 hours 27 minutes and 46 seconds of data was collected.

At the end of the interviews and focus groups, participants were debriefed. Participants were offered a verbal debrief and given a document detailing further information (see Appendix 13). Further details of the debrief process can be found in section 3.7.4.

3.6.4 Transcribing the data

The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher; the researcher transcribed spoken conversation as well as laughter and verbal sounds of agreement. Pauses were not transcribed. Transcription allowed the researcher to immerse herself in the raw data before analysis began. Identifiable information including names of participants, schools and staff were anonymised. Pseudonyms were also assigned to participants.

3.7 Ethical considerations

To ensure ethical and professional standards were upheld during the research process, the researcher followed guidance from the following governing bodies: The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) Standards of Conduct Performance and Ethics (2016); The British Psychological Society (BPS) Guidelines for Minimum Standards of Ethical Approval in Psychological Research; The BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (2018); The BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2021); and the University of Nottingham's Code of Research Conduct and Research Ethics (2016).

The study received ethical approval from the University of Nottingham's Ethics Committee in May 2022 (see appendix 16). The researcher also adhered to safeguarding and ethical procedures outlined within guidance from the LA in which the study took place. The researcher addressed the following ethical considerations:

3.7.1 Informed consent

Verbal consent was obtained from youth group staff who allowed the study to take place. Prior to data collection, written consent was obtained from YP (participants) and from parents and carers of any participant under the age of 16 (see Appendix 14 & 15). Without parental consent CYP under 16 were unable to take part in the study.

Participants aged 16 years and older did not require parental consent. These participants were instead asked to provide proof of age and assigned a 'responsible adult' (a member of staff from the youth group). In line with the Mental Capacity Act Code of Practice (DoH, 2005) it was assumed that anyone over the age of 16 had mental capacity to consent; there were no concerns about young people's capacity raised by the 'responsible adults'. The young people's capacity to consent was further checked by ensuring they understood the purpose of the study and what they were being asked to do.

Verbal consent was obtained from all participants at the beginning of the focus groups and individual interviews. Throughout the study youth group staff, participants, and parents and carers were reminded that consent was voluntary. Given the potentially sensitive nature of the study, participants were asked to consider the content of the study topic and if personal risks were identified, consent to take part was not granted.

3.7.2 Confidentiality

Interviews were audio recorded on a Dictaphone. Audio files were stored securely on a password protected device and once transcribed (within a three-week period of data collection), were permanently deleted. Paper documentation (including consent forms and demographic information) was stored in a locked container. All data was gathered and stored in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Data Protection Act 2018 (HM Government, 2018). All documentation will be permanently deleted at the end of the doctoral training course.

Participants within the focus groups were asked to co-create and agree to a confidentiality and privacy agreement as a condition of participation. If this was not agreed to, participants would have been excluded from participating. An example of the agreement can be found in Appendix 17. The agreement aimed to protect confidentiality ('anything we say stays in here'), address potential power imbalances ('don't talk over people') and foster respectful interactions ('care for people around you') (Kitzinger, 1994; Mertens, 2014).

3.7.3 Anonymity

To protect individuals' privacy, the researcher complied with GDPR (HM Government, 2018). Parents and carers received a GDPR notice as part of their information pack (see Appendix 8) and all those involved in the study were advised that personal information would remain anonymous (Robson, 2011).

3.7.4 Debriefing

The debrief document that participants received signposted them to support and guidance from charities and organisations regarding safe sex and non-consensual sex. Participants were also given the opportunity to ask questions as part of a group or individually. Staff provided an emotional check-in with all participants, on a 1:1 basis, after data collection.

3.7.5 Participant protection from harm

Although it was perceived that the risk of harm to participants was minimal, the researcher worked closely with staff to minimise the risk of potential stress, discomfort, and psychological harm (BPS, 2021). Considerations included finding an appropriate space for data collection, offering comfort breaks to participants, and providing ongoing support through staff. The composition of the focus groups was also considered to ensure that the participants were with those of a similar age, and therefore likely to be exposure to language and conversational topics which were familiar to the group. Younger and older participants took part in separate focus groups. A description of the two youth group settings, and age of the participants, can be found in section 3.5.3.

As a precautionary measure, the researcher worked with staff to identify a designated safeguarding lead. The researcher also familiarised herself with LA policy to ensure that if a disclosure was made, it was handled appropriately. Participants were made aware of how information would be shared if a disclosure of risk, harm or concern was raised. This would involve contacting the LA Children's Social Care Team and following the guidance outlined in the Working Together to Safeguard Children document (DfE, 2018). Any information would be accurately recorded and shared only with those who needed to know, in a timely and purposeful manner.

3.7.6 Right to withdraw

Participants, parents and carers and youth group staff were informed that participation in the study was entirely voluntary. This information was detailed within the information, consent and debrief forms. Participants could withdraw at any time, and without reason. An alternative room was available for participants to access if required.

3.7.7 Power imbalances

The literature highlights the importance of addressing power imbalances within research (Robson, 2011). As a researcher working for the LA in which the research was conducted,

there was a risk the researcher's employment status may have impacted upon engagement. To minimise power imbalances the researcher spent time volunteering at the youth groups and building rapport (see section 3.4.2). To address power imbalances within the focus groups, participants co-created a group agreement (see section 3.6.2). During the focus groups the researcher also utilised skills in facilitation (Wagner, 2008) to ensure more reserved members of the group had sufficient opportunity to contribute reflections (Thomas, 2013).

3.8 Data analysis
3.8.1 Reflexive Thematic Analysis
Raw data gathered during individual interviews and focus groups was analysed using Braun and Clarke's RTA (2006; 2021). RTA is a six-phase analytical approach used to understand patterns of meaning across datasets. A description of the six phases of analysis in relation to the current study can be found in Table 7.

Braun and Clarke argue that RTA does not align solely with one epistemological or ontological positioning. It is underpinned by social constructionist and relativist ideologies and therefore can be used by researchers, such as the current author, who adopt a critical realist stance (Clarke & Braun, 2013). The approach does not attempt to uncover 'underlying truths' (Braun & Clarke, 2019), but instead supports the researcher to critically reflect on their own constructions, through fluid exploration of the six stages (Terry et al, 2017).

The approach was favoured by the researcher as it complements the study's flexible research design and is thought to be an accessible tool for new researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2019). RTA also supports the transparency of research, as it requires the researcher to keep a clear audit trail (Anderson, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a tool, RTA can be used to produce actional outcomes and therefore such an analysis may help to inform policy developments (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This is important as the researcher aims to draw connections between YP's experiences and government policy.

To comprehensively answer the study's aims, the researcher coded the data twofold (see stage two). Firstly, the researcher coded the data in relation to the main research question: *What are CYP's experiences of the RSE curriculum?* The researcher also conducted a second cycle of coding to answer the sub-question: *How do CYP experience the teaching of consent, as part of the RSE curriculum?*

Table 7. Six stages of Reflexive Thematic Analysis as defined by Braun & Clarke (2021).

Stage	Researcher's Process
Stage One: Familiarising yourself with the data	The researcher immersed herself in the datasets by transcribing each interview and focus group. The data took approximately 40 hours to transcribe. During this stage the researcher repeatedly engaged with the data and original transcripts. The researcher noted any dominant discourses or minority voices within the focus groups (Parker, 2005).
Stage Two: Coding	The researcher coded the entire data set in response to the two distinct but complimentary research questions. Codes aimed to capture the notion of the data and were presented as brief phrases. Several coding sweeps were conducted to ensure the data had been comprehensively coded. This stage was viewed as an organic, subjective process, where codes were refined (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The researcher adopted an inductive approach to coding. Initial codes focused on intentional language at a semantic level, where appropriate, some latent codes were applied.
Stage Three: Generating initial themes	The codes were clustered and collated into broader themes, which reflected the entirety of the dataset. Braun and Clarke (2021) defined themes as a 'central organising concept'. This stage has been coined an 'active process of pattern formulation and identification' (Terry et al., 2017). The researcher used initial thematic maps as a visual medium to explore the themes and subthemes of the data.
Stage Four: Developing and reviewing themes	The researcher explored the relationship between overarching themes, subthemes, and codes. Themes and subthemes were refined to ensure best interpretation of data. Themes were compared to the original data set and research questions. Direct quotes supported themes extracted (Breen, 2006). The researcher produced a refined thematic map. By re-exploring the data at this stage, the researcher hoped to support the confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the study.
Stage Five: Refining, defining, and naming themes	The researcher assigned a clear, specific, and unique label to the themes and subthemes. The researcher took time to consider the language used so the themes had specific boundaries and did not overlap (Braun & Clarke, 2013). At this stage the researcher considered completing member checks, a process whereby participants read and comment on the analysis. However, in line with the researcher's epistemological positioning and the use of both semantic and latent codes, member checks were discredited as it was thought such critical analysis may be unrecognisable to participants (Braun & Clarke, 2021).
Stage Six: Writing up	A comprehensive write up of the researcher's analytical interpretations and conclusions can be found in Chapter Four. Extracts have been used to empower the voice of participants and illustrate their lived experiences.

3.8.2 Braun and Clarke's 15-point checklist

Throughout the analysis the researcher engaged in a process of reflexivity (see section 3.3.3); reflexivity is integral to good quality qualitative research (Anderson, 2017). During data analysis the researcher attempted to explicitly demonstrate analytical decisions to support the dependability and confirmability of the research study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Parker, 2005; Terry et al., 2017). The researcher acknowledges that themes and codes are not permanent and have been subjectively shaped by the researcher's own values (Berger, 2015; Gough & Madill, 2012). The researcher enhanced the study's rigour (Yardley, 2017) by utilising Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2021) 15-point checklist. A detailed description of the checklist can be found in Table 8.

During data analysis the researcher spent a prolonged engagement with the datasets (Korstjens & Moser, 2018) to enhance the credibility of the research study. Throughout the study the researcher has ensured dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) by attempting to explain the process of RTA in a clear, transparent, and logical way. Finally, the researcher has kept a clear data audit, amending extracts of the original transcripts and six stages of RTA, as part of the study's appendices (see appendix 18-24).

Table 8. Utilising Braun and Clarke's (2021) 15-point checklist for good quality research.

Number	Process	Application of criteria
1	Transcription	Transcripts were transcribed to an appropriate level of detail and checked against original recordings
2	Coding	Thorough repeated attention was given to each dataset
3		The researcher engaged in a coding process which was thorough and comprehensive, illustrated by numerous anecdotal quotes across datasets
4		Relevant extracts have been collated
5		Themes were checked against original datasets and coded data
6		Each theme comprises of a central organising concept with subthemes appropriately linked
7	Analysis and interpretation	The researcher went beyond surface level summarising, presenting an analysis of the data in Chapter 4
8		Extracts have been provided to evidence the analysis
9		The researcher has aimed to present the data in such a way that it describes a well-organised story which address the research question
10		The researcher has aimed to provide a balance of data extracts and analytical narrative
11	Overall	Sufficient time has been allocated to all phases of analysis
12	Written report	Theoretical positions, assumptions and the specific TA approach are detailed in the methodology (Chapter Three)
13		The researcher felt there is a good fit between what was said and what was done
14		The researcher has aimed to use language which reflects her ontological and epistemological position
15		Throughout the research process the researcher played an active role

Chapter 4 – Analysis and Interpretation

4.1 Chapter overview

This chapter will present an analysis of the datasets to answer the research questions outlined in Chapter Two:

Research Question: *What are CYP's experiences of the RSE curriculum?*

Sub-question: *How do CYP experience the teaching of consent as part of the RSE curriculum?*

While the research questions are distinct, the way in which data was collected, and the way in which CYP spoke about their experiences, subsequently resulted in crossover within the data. The researcher chose to analyse the data two-fold; firstly, the researcher explored CYP's general experiences of RSE; secondly the researcher re-analysed the data to explore specific experiences in relation to sexual consent. Within this chapter, the analysis is presented separated; similarities across themes are discussed further in Chapter Five.

4.2 Overview of themes

The themes generated through a process of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021) are presented within Figure 4. To accompany the thematic map, the researcher has presented a detailed commentary of the themes, evidenced through use of quotes and reflexive interpretations. The researcher has demonstrated both an illustrative and analytical account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021) by drawing links to wider literature presented in Chapter Two. Summative conclusions, discussions and implications for practice will be explored further in Chapter Five.

Figure 4. A thematic map (Braun & Clarke, 2021) of CYP's experiences of the RSE curriculum

1.1 Tackling a gendered-heteronormative curriculum

1.2 Consequences of a sex-negative curriculum

Theme 1: A conflict of interest between espoused practice and policy and a curriculum important to CYP

1.3 We need to learn earlier

1.4 Why were we not taught during COVID-19?

Research question: What are children and young people's experiences of the RSE curriculum?

Theme 2: Current teaching practices do not align with CYP's preferred methods

2.1 Passive vs active learning

2.2 Conversation as a teaching tool

2.3 Teaching terminology for the real world

Theme 3: A perceived lack of trust, confidentiality and positive student-teacher relationships

3.1 Feeling unable to speak to teachers

3.2 Without teachers who supports CYP?

Theme 4: The classroom environment does not enable feelings of safety or comfort

4.1 Ensuring CYP feel safe when they walk through the door

4.2 Respecting and fostering confidentiality facilitates participation

Sub- question: How do children and young people experience the teaching of consent, as part of the RSE curriculum?

Theme 5. Do children and young people really understand consent?

5.1 Pedagogy practices for teaching consent requires improvement

5.2 Teaching of consent is not viewed as a priority within RSE

5.3 Difficulties defining and applying consent to real world contexts

4.3 Research question: What are CYP's experiences of the RSE curriculum?

4.3.1 Theme 1: A conflict of interest between espoused practice and policy and a curriculum important to CYP

There was an overarching consensus that despite government reforms (DfE, 2019a; Greening, 2017), the curriculum continues to be perceived by CYP as unfit for purpose. It was suggested by participants that content is not memorable nor meaningful to their lived experiences; a finding noted across much of the RSE literature (Strange et al., 2003; Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016). The researcher concluded that curriculum content is often viewed as too simplistic, repetitive and monotonous. Across datasets the researcher noticed a conflict of interest in topics taught as part of the RSE curriculum and those valued by CYP. The researcher further understood there to be a difference in what is written in policy and guidance (see section 2.2.3) and what CYP receive as part of the current RSE curriculum. Within this theme the researcher identified four subthemes titled: '*Tackling a gendered-heteronormative curriculum'; 'Consequences of a sex-negative curriculum'; 'We need to learn earlier'; 'Why were we not taught during COVID-19?'*

Subtheme 1.1: Tackling a gendered-heteronormative curriculum.
Many of the participants began by reflecting on their experiences of being taught RSE in primary school. There was a consensus in primary schools that lessons are segregated by gender and content taught is gender specific. It appeared apparent that females were taught 'female specific topics' such as menstruation and the stages of pregnancy, while males received substantially more information on male contraception:

'in like primary school they put on like a video and the boys go outside and do PE and we will we'll learn all about periods and all the mood swings' (Kevina; 30-31)

'they didn't teach the boys about it (periods) I don't understand why' (Felix; 99-100)

'it is important cause like not many boys I feel like not a lot of boys actually know about female reproductive systems and stuff' (Julie; 204-205)

'like girls no one tells girls how to put condoms on boys (Wendy; 228-229)

'I know what all the girls said in my class they said they want to know how to put a condom on a boy' (Keith; 222-223)

For Felix, who identifies as female (but in primary school was taught as a male), segregation by gender was particularly uncomfortable. Felix shared his personal frustrations, coining teaching in this way as *'stupid', 'weird'* and *'strange'.* Felix voiced that he was *'thankful'* he subsequently received RSE in mixed-sex classes during secondary school. Although the reformed curriculum specifies that educators should teach content that is inclusive to all gender identities (DfE, 2019a), Felix's story suggests that there continues to be a lack of sensitivity to the individual needs of CYP.

Participants suggested that a gendered curriculum has contributed to a lack of knowledge and understanding in CYP. These findings add to concerns identified by Ofsted in 2013. For some, a lack of knowledge and understanding has led to a deterioration in mixed-sex friendships and a breakdown of romantic relationships:

'when you're in a relationship and when you're on like your time of the month and whatever and you have like a really bad mood swing and they'll blame it on sommit and then they'll fallout but they don't understand cos like they haven't learned about it' (Kevina; 35-37)

'if anyone gets a bit they say salty it's get annoyed or sommit they'll say oh it's cos you're on your period but I don't know if they're just misusing that or if they don't understand' (Sid; 151-152)

Most participants voiced wanting to learn about the opposite gender when receiving teaching on sex, reproduction, menstruation, pleasure and consent. It was suggested by Jeffery that such knowledge could be gained through co-learning opportunities:

'I think that girls should teach the boys with the sex education and everything and I think the boys should teach the girls what it's like for what the boys to go through cos if they don't the girls won't know what it's like for the boys to go through and it's going to be the same but the opposite for the girls (Jeffery; 229-230).

These findings add to the wider literature that has highlighted the importance of mixed-sex classes, co-learning and a comprehensive curriculum (Forrest et al., 2004; Hirst, 2004; Lee et al., 2018; Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016).

Participants also suggested that a gendered curriculum may contribute to stereotypical gender norms noted within society. Several CYP voiced a need for a generational shift in attitudes, which they felt could be addressed through RSE:

'I don't understand why a lot of people are like don't want boys to know about periods'
(Felix; 105-106)

'it shouldn't be expected that every time the boy has to put the condom on' (Wendy; 228-229)

'it's that generation where boys have to learn it' (Jeffery; 148)

Participants further discussed discrepancies in the extent to which the curriculum is inclusive of all sexualities. Some schools were perceived inclusive (Mia and Sage), while others felt teaching on LGBTQ+ relationships were tokenistic. Julie and Lila discussed an initiative in their schools which aims to give voice to LGBTQ+ students. The researcher felt the extract demonstrates the school's failure in supporting LGTBQ+ students. The narrative also suggested that while topics may be taught within RSE lessons, inclusivity is not always achieved at a whole school level:

'but it's one of those things where like the school do it but nobody actually like wants to do it cos they get a bit embarrassed' (Lila; 52-53)

'yeah' (Julie; 54)

'would you go and speak to these people?' (Researcher; 56)

'probably not' (Lila; 57)

'no it's just like you know when schools do something but nobody's actually like actually doing it it's just like they do it to like' (Julie; 58-59)

'look good' (Lila; 60)

'yeah like a tick box thing for the school to look good' (Julie; 61)

Despite the reforms' stated aims that RSE will celebrate a wealth of family composition, including same sex relationship (DfE, 2019a), participants' experiences suggested that the

current curriculum has a strong heteronormative agenda, in which heterosexual relationships are prioritised.

The researcher interpreted that a heteronormative agenda is further indirectly prioritised through significant teaching on biological topics such as reproduction to create life:

'they didn't do anything like with same sex they just did the relationship part with like a man and a women like nothing else actually' (Mia; 111-112)

'you learn like how to make a baby basically' (Kevina; 159)

The lived experiences of participants suggested that the curriculum is not dissimilar to that taught in the early 1900's (Hall, 2004).

Subtheme 1.2: Consequences of a sex-negative curriculum

Participants highlighted that many topics important to CYP, such as pleasure, masturbation, kinks and how to improve their sex lives, are not covered as part of the RSE curriculum:

'we don't specifically get taught that sex is a good thing that people can enjoy it for pleasure and it's healthy' (Wendy; 308-309)

'never in my entire life in school have I heard anything about masturbation' (Saul; 200)

These findings build upon what is known about the experiences of CYP in England (post-reforms) (Forrest et al., 2004; Hirst, 2004; Strange et al., 2003; Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016) and CYP across the world (McCann et al., 2019; Pound et al., 2016).

The researcher understood that CYP have few opportunities to discuss positive sexual experiences in school, despite a desire to learn. In the few instances topics have been discussed, the researcher felt topics were tainted by negative connotations and undesirable attributions. Saul (203-205) reflected on his experience of learning about masturbation:

'It's just sort of been like it hasn't been deemed okay…what I'm saying is no one talks about it and I think it needs to be talked about'

Participants suggested that teachers discourage sexual activities by highlighting potential risks. When discussed in this way, sexual activities were often viewed as '*taboo*' (Julie; 232):

'they just tell us not to have sex' (Sandra; 64)

'we are just taught the negative things like we don't we get taught like if you don't use contraception you'll get pregnant if you don't use a condom you could get an STD' (Wendy; 305-306)

These findings add strength to the wider literature that has recognised a lack of opportunity for CYP to discuss sex positive topics (Hirst, 2004; Sundaram & Staunton, 2016). Participants suggested that a lack of discussions around sex positive topics, may lead CYP to withdraw from seeking support, or may lead CYP to question their own moral views. The researcher felt this to be a novel finding within the literature:

'that's what puts people off cos they're not taught about anything else so they just keep it to themselves' (Lila; 283-284)

'don't watch porn because it ruins sex…it like fucks up your head basically (Trevor; 69-70)

'if you don't get taught about it you might think that it's wrong' (Sandra; 327)

'think they're weird and not open up' (Wendy; 328)

Subtheme 1.3: We need teaching earlier.

Many of the participants voiced that topics taught as part of the RSE curriculum are delivered too late; the importance of starting Relationship, Sex and Health Education earlier is recognised widely in the literature (Alldred, 2007; Hilton, 2007; Hirst, 2004; Pound et al., 2016; Strange et al., 2003). Participants suggested that content should be delivered at a time which reflects personal experiences, such as starting puberty and beginning a romantic or sexual relationship:

'they just tell you about things that aren't really real life' (Jeffery, 53-54)

'stuff that actually applies to us in real life' (Wendy; 75)

The researcher understood that the timing in which RSE is delivered is fundamental to its success. An age-appropriate curriculum which adapts to the developing maturity of CYP has been noted within the wider literature (DfE, 2019a; Greening, 2017). Lila offered one explanation as to why timing is crucial:

'just adding to that learning from a younger age I think as well with learning later on that's what makes people like zone out and makes it uncomfortable is because you not if you talk about it from earlier age on you're more comfortable with the topic' (Lila; 214-216)

While there was a consensus that some topics should be taught earlier, participants agreed that Year 9 and 10 (age 13-15 years) is the 'ideal age' for teaching on sexual relationships. Participants suggested this is an appropriate age due to increasing levels of maturity, knowledge and experience of long-term relationships. This age could be seen to reflect theories of adolescent development whereby CYP begin to develop norms around sexual behaviours (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2004).

The researcher understood that participants seek a curriculum which adapts with the age and maturity of CYP;

'like as you get older they don't really do more detail or anything which I think they should' (Julie; 21-22)

'year ten is like that's when they they completely gave up but that's the time when people are more likely to start having sex cause that's like fifteen sixteen' (Wendy; 238-239)

Subtheme 1.4: Why were we not taught during COVID?

Although only discussed by a few participants, there appeared to be a disconnect between taught content prioritised by educators during the COVID-19 pandemic, and content which felt important to CYP. The pandemic was a time which saw the majority of CYP being taught online, and a time in which educators had to quickly adapt to virtual distance teaching. It was suggested by participants that there was a lack of RSE teaching during this period. Consequently, participants described missed learning opportunities and a need to revisit content. These experiences felt important to highlight given that the curriculum has been developed in sequential building blocks (DfE, 2019a). Participants voiced:

'I think we did a little bit of sex education online like towards the end in PSHE but barely any' (Sage; 6-7)

'they prioritised English and Maths and these subjects but they didn't prioritise sex ed or the things that are going to be helpful for us when were older' (Lila; 34-35)

'they teach you how to use a condom but because of COVID my year didn't get to do that but they've not gone back but I think they should go back (Julie; 30-31)

4.3.2 Theme 2: Current teaching practices do not align with CYP's preferred methods.

The researcher conceptualised an overarching narrative held by participants which suggested a disgruntlement towards current teaching practices. Participants' experiences suggested that current teaching practices are perceived as insufficient. Participants voiced a desire to want to learn, and were able to offer suggestions as to how pedagogy could be improved. The role and inclusion of CYP were central to these ideas. Within this theme the researcher identified three subthemes: *'Passive vs active learning'; 'Conversation as a teaching tool'; 'Teaching terminology for the real world'.*

Subtheme 2.1: Passive vs active learning
RSE lessons were frequently described as '*boring'* (Lewis, Felix, Sage and Mia). This construct was used to describe both the quality of lessons as well as teaching pedagogy. Participants implied that they were often passive recipients of information. The researcher understood CYP were rarely actively engaged in lessons or provided with opportunities to participate in practical learning activities:

'they just go through the PowerPoint and click on the links and just tell you to read it' (Lila; 93)

'like making us just listen about it which is boring' (Mia; 84)

'most of the time we kind of like don't really do anything' (Felix; 121)

'I don't think we did any like actual like hands on stuff' (Sage; 73)

Participants spoke about an overreliance on the use of videos. It was implied that participants viewed videos as insufficient passive teaching tools, further emphasising a lack of interactive learning. While heavily reliant on videos, the quality of the videos was described as *'trashy'* (Lewis; 177) and *'crappy'* (Sid; 192)*. Videos appeared to lack detail, while topics felt irrelevant and meaningless to CYP:

'they don't like specifically teach it they just put videos on… actually like usually just put videos on and were not really taught anything' (Kevina; 160-162)

'the video was only five minutes long and it tried to cover the entirety of puberty for girls so I don't think it like it like kind of like brushed upon everything but not like in detail (Mia; 103-104)

'they're just not good like all the videos that they use it is stupid not like how a relationship would really be' (Jeffery; 55-56)

The researcher concluded that passive teaching styles may be contributing to levels of disengagement noted by participants:

'people just have their headphones in the entire time' (Lila; 99)

'I just end up chatting with my mates half the time to be honest' (Julie; 20)

Participants appeared to favour lessons where they were actively involved in learning (see subtheme 2.2) and where teachers were viewed as skilled in delivering taught content. Skilled teachers were viewed as those who could offer multiple learning explanations, provide learning in sufficient detail above and beyond the videos, and those who could reflect on personal experiences and draw comparisons to real world contexts:

'I'd rather it be more like interactive' (Lewis; 25)

'we did lots of sheets and like activities about what to do who to tell uh and where to go for support and like and like what things you can like do to help yourself with it it was like really helpful' (Mia; 8-10)

'she told us how it felt for her to like have a kid and then it just like it just made it more real' (Jeffery; 170-171)

A few participants also discussed social media as a teaching tool. Influencers were discussed positively by Julie and Lila who suggested they '*normalise*' conversations by creating a *'comfortable'* space in which CYP can learn. Influencers and successful teachers were described as *'chill/ed'* (Julie, Lila, Saul). These findings extent previous literature which suggests teachers should be relatable and act as role models (Allen, 2009; Goldstein et al., 2007).

Julie suggested that teachers could learn from such videos and use them a teaching tool within the classroom:

'I think even teachers could do with like seeing those people on social media and then like putting up for the class to see cos if they didn't wanna talk about it then they've got that video to base it of (Julie; 234-236)

Subtheme 2.2: Conversation as a teaching tool

Participants discussed the importance of conversations as a teaching tool when learning about RSE. The opportunity for discussions appeared a central narrative, which outweighed watching videos, taking notes, and copying information from the board:

'PSHE is more discussion than writing' (Sage; 115)

'like not putting a video on like actually talking about it' (Lewis; 176)

'a lot of boring note taking as well' (Sage; 74)

'like if they were to put the video on instead of just like pausing it halfway through and making you write loads I think they should instead of you writing loads get them to like explain what happened' (Sid; 190-192)

The power of conversations was understood to result in incidental learning and whole class discussions:

'everyone just started talking about things and like the condoms and contraception so people got to know that way' (Jeffery; 170-171)

'one of the people in the class put put her hand she put her hand up and said my mum was in labour with me for for four days and we were just discussion stuff like that' (Mia: 135-137)

Participants' experiences suggested to the researcher that there was potential misunderstanding by teachers surrounding preferences for class discussion. Participants voiced that they felt teachers believed CYP do not want to discuss sex education topics within RSE lessons, however in reality participants would like greater opportunities to ask questions and contribute to lessons:

'I think if they were willing to you know uh talk about it more yeah I think they would just assume that we wouldn't have want to talk about it but like it would be good to talk about it more' (Felix; 203-205)

'I want like more people like asking different questions because if it was just one person asking lots of questions it's not very good it's kind of awkward' (Jack; 378-379)

Participants viewed favourable educators as those who actively encouraged CYP to engage in the learning, and those who valued and empowered the voice of the individual:

'he lets you explain something' (Kevina; 212)

'like listening to us and know like not just like telling us what to do but actually like listening if someone has like got something to say rather than just like ignoring it' (Lewis; 177-178)

These findings reflect wider literature that suggests effective teachers are those who listen equally to female and male students (Strange et al., 2003) and enable the voice of CYP within the classroom (Hirst, 2004).

Participants voiced that at times, RSE lessons can be uncomfortable and awkward. *'Awkward'* was used to describe subject content, teaching approaches and teachers. The wider literature recognised that RSE lessons can elicit strong emotional responses in CYP (Pound et al., 2016). Although RSE was viewed as '*awkward'*, participants recognised that for CYP to learn, CYP and teachers must overcome feelings of discomfort:

'I know it gonna be awkward but like at least like talk to kids about it then they'll feel less awkward about it' (Felix; 128-129)

'I know it can be awkward but we need teaching' (Wendy; 319)

Participants voiced a preference for RSE lessons in which CYP are exposed to potentially 'awkward' topics and are given opportunities to discuss the topics with one another. It was suggested by participants that exposure to perceived 'awkward' topics helped increase levels of comfort, acceptance and normality for both CYP and educators:

'what's been good is the fact that like that we are actually doing it like talking about it (Mia; 171)

'every time it now comes up I'm starting to get used to it' (Jeffery, 148)

'my PSHE teacher said that when she first told us and she was a little bit uncomfortable but she just got over it' (Sage; 133-134)

Addressing emotional discomfort is important as it reduces the likelihood of disengagement (Buston et al., 2002).

Subtheme 2.3: Teaching terminology for the real world

Participants voiced a need to be taught curriculum specific terminology in their RSE lessons; an element which the researcher understood was missing from current practice. Participants voiced their frustrations around being encouraged to think of alternative words for their genitalia and some even alluded to potential negative consequences of miscommunication because of being encouraged to use alternative terms:

'that's another thing my teacher never said it he told us to think of names we should call it'

(Keith; 249-250)

'if people keep being taught like don't call a vagina a vagina or a penis a penis and like a young child got sexually assaulted they can't like what's what's someone gonna think if they just start telling oh someone touched whatever stupid word they call it like no one's gonna have a clue what they're talking about or gonna take 'em seriously' (Wendy; 262-264)

Participants' experiences suggested that when curriculum specific terminology is used in class, for some there may be increased levels of discomfort and increased perceived negative behaviours. Participants suggested that teachers should challenge inappropriate behaviour and laughter as exposure is important to increase levels of comfort and acceptance of the terminology:

'not not just ignoring it when it's a word that makes people laugh and not just moving on when people laugh cos it's actually important that we talk about these things' (Sid; 179-180)

While participants voiced a preference for curriculum specific terminology when describing genitalia, participants also suggested that teachers should avoid complicated scientific terms. Participants suggested that educators should use terminology which is clear, accessible, relatable and sensitive to the age and maturity of CYP:

'it helps when it isn't too sciencey and like like they use normal words not like complicated words like like they just use words we use' (Mia; 94-96)

'I think another thing that was useful was the fact that when they were talking about like they weren't being really like childish with it they would talk talking to us like we were year sevens not like we were year twos' (Mia; 43-45)

The researcher concluded that CYP view successful educators as those who can create a language rich classroom environment.

4.3.3 Theme 3: A perceived lack of trust, confidentiality and positive student-teacher relationships

Across the interviews and focus groups, the researcher understood that many participants felt that they did not have positive student-teacher relationships. These experiences appeared to be tainted by a perceived lack of trust and confidentiality when seeking support and guidance. Participants' experiences suggested that without strong relationships, CYP seek support and guidance from alternative sources of information, however the availability and appropriateness of this information depends on the support network around the individual. Within this theme the researcher identified two subthemes: *'Feeling unable to speak to teachers'; 'Without teachers who supports CYP?'*

Subtheme 3.1: Feeling unable to speak to teachers
Across the datasets there were discrepancies in levels of openness with teachers. The researcher concluded from participants' experiences, that positive teacher-student relationships, which had been established over time, may help to facilitate open conversations around RSE.

Several participants spoke about levels of trust which facilitated or hindered their relationships with teachers. The importance of trust has been recognised widely across the literature (Allen, 2009; Hirst, 2004; Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016). Participants voiced that teachers must be trustworthy, honest and approachable for CYP to feel able to share information:

'the teacher that I'm close with that I've had for a while' (Sage; 132)

'you feel like you want to open up about or tell her' (Kevina; 70)

'I just that trust actually is so important' (Julie; 303)

The findings align with the work of Strange and colleagues (2003) who noted that favourable teachers were viewed as 'open' and 'fair'.

Entwined within trusting relationships was the notion of confidentiality. The researcher understood that participants related 'trustworthy teachers' to those who kept information confidential and did not share information with others (e.g., parents and carers) without consent. Sharing of confidential or personal information had detrimental consequences, such as a breakdown of relationships and a reduction in seeking support:

'we told her and she was like oh it's completely confidential and then told our head of house who then told our parents even though they said it's confidential so they lied about it'
(Wendy; 50-51)

'like they make you think that you can trust them and then they do that… she was being nice about it and then just grassed on us' (Wendy; 212-214)

'I'd just keep it to myself' (Trevor; 108)

'think that's the main reason I if I was in a situation I wouldn't say anything just trusting somebody with that sort of information is quite big' (Lila; 292-293)

Participants also voiced concerns around a lack of communication between teachers at a whole school level, particularly when support had been sought. Poor communication between students and teachers has been recognised within the wider literature (Elia, 2000). Participants voiced:

'I feel like it gets too much just once you told like one teacher they write it down and don't pass it onto the next teacher' (Kevina; 75-76)

'so what you're describing is like the teachers don't communicate with other people cause that's how stupid it is' (Jack; 78-79)

Most participants voiced they would prefer a teacher who is of the same sex. Same sex educators appeared to increase levels of comfort and allowed CYP to relate to personal anecdotes:

'for me personally a woman I feel more comfortable' (Lila; 121)

'yeah cause like they have gone through it and they know what happens' (Kevina; 200)

'know how to make people comfortable when talking about they've had experience' (Lila; 104-105)

Participants from the all-girls school implied that there are specific reasons as to why they attend such a school and as such, they felt the sex of teacher should reflect the demographics of the school population. The researcher felt this voice complimented the voice of students attending mixed sex schools, who expressed a want to be taught by both a male and female educator:

'most girls go to an all-girls school reason cause it's all girls so I feel like it's only right that the person teaching us is a girl' (Lila; 124-125)

'I feel that we should have a female and a male teacher and they both talk about it' (Sid; 187-188)

There was a mutual agreement by participants that external educators may be more appropriate than mainstream teachers to deliver RSE. Unlike the work of Hirst (2004), who concluded that teachers are credible educators, CYP in this study felt external educators were better placed to deliver RSE. External educators were viewed as '*educated'* (Lila), '*professional'* (Saul), and '*experts'* (Keith). Frequently mentioned by participants were 'nurses' as preferred educators.

Participants voiced that external educators enable a separation and disconnection from the school setting, which the researcher understood increases levels of comfort and decreases feelings of awkwardness:

'you don't want to talk to a teacher about it and you feel uncomfortable about it because you see them a lot around school and if a nurse comes in you can tell them you don't have to see them a lot' (Kevina; 252-254)

Within the wider literature, external educators have been favoured by CYP as they allow distinct boundaries to be created between educators and CYP, which those in teaching roles cannot offer (Pound et al., 2016).

Subtheme 3.2: Without teachers who supports CYP?

Many of the participants spoke about a lack of support, guidance and signposting within schools. While some participants were able to identify support services in schools, such as

the 'well-being team' (Julie), 'school nurse' (Sage, Julie), 'head of year' (Mia), others acknowledged that they did not know where to seek support (Wendy, Lila). A lack of available support is not unique to the experiences of the participants in this study (Hirst 2004; Strange et al., 2003).

For those who were able to reflect on support in schools, the researcher understood that support offered does not always meet the preferences of the CYP. Participants voiced that there is a heavy onus on CYP to speak to staff or external agencies, with a perceived lack of consideration that this method of support may not be appropriate for all pupils:

'it's either this helpline or speak to like a trusted adult but not everyone feels comfortable speaking to an adult' (Julie; 279-280)

'I don't really feel like that's something that I that I particularly would do is like speak to teachers' (Sage; 166)

'I don't think they realise not everybody's comfortable with sitting and talking to like you know like Mind' (Lila; 275-276)

'they just need to realize that not everybody's the same' (Lila; 282)

Although CYP preferred external educators since they allowed a degree of separation between students and staff, when seeking support, participants appeared to favour familiar adults with whom they had a pre-existing relationship:

'I don't know them so yeah why am I gonna sit down and tell 'em everything personal' (Julie; 298-299)

'I want to feel like you would be able to share it with a teacher you would feel comfortable sharing' (Lewis; 28)

A few participants discussed teacher perceptions of CYP accessing contraception in schools; of these the majority felt teachers held negative attributions around CYP accessing contraception. This left several students feeling judged and criticised:

'she was criticizing us saying it's not right saying you shouldn't be doing that' (Sandra; 143-144)

'when you're more likely to be having to sex more likely to be needing protection then you feel judged for it' (Sandra; 147-448)

'surely they'd rather you go and ask for condoms than doing it without' (Jack; 147-148)

With a perceived lack of support in schools, the researcher understood that CYP seek support outside the school context. Participants discussed parents as support networks and educators. The availability of education and support appeared to be mediated by relationships:

'I'm lucky enough that I can just talk to my mum about stuff like that but obviously not everyone can' (Wendy; 105)

The researcher recognised several reasons why CYP feel unable speak to their parents. Firstly, parents may be dismissive due a lack of understanding and secondly, parents may be frustrated that CYP are engaging in sexual activities. Without positive relationships, participants appeared reluctant to seek support from parents:

'I was a bit afraid to ask my parents in case they didn't understand… I was scared that they would've just pushed me off' (Felix; 65-66)

'especially if I had like a bad bad family who would react horrible' (Sandra; 138)

'there'll be a lot of parents out there who will get vexed' (Wendy; 58)

Similarly, participants discussed the role of friends as support networks and educators. Relationships, comfort and trust resonated throughout the discussions. While some participants felt they had friends they could confide in, others recognised that friends were not suitable educators:

'I'd talk to my friend but I feel like not everyone always has that' (Julie, 288-289)

'friends (laughed) uh which wasn't fun' (Felix; 29)

4.3.4 Theme 4: The classroom environment does not enable feelings of safety or comfort

The experiences of participants suggested to the researcher that within the classroom setting, CYP often do not feel safe or comfortable. Participants alluded that for RSE lessons to be successful, feelings of safety and comfort should be considered prior to RSE lessons

beginning. Participants' experiences suggested that the learning environment plays an important role in facilitating feelings of comfort and safety, as does the management of shared experiences and student behaviours. Within this theme the researcher identified two subthemes: *'Ensuring CYP feel safe when they walk through the door'; 'Respecting and fostering confidentiality facilitates participation'.*

Subtheme 4.1: Ensuring CYP feel safe when they walk through the door

Across the datasets, participants voiced a wish to be prewarned about RSE lesson content. Timings varied from a week to a day in advance, and Mia suggested the use of a timetable to outline upcoming lesson content. Given the potentially sensitive nature of the curriculum content, prewarning CYP about upcoming topics may reduce worries (McCann et al., 2019). For students like Sid, who have additional SEND, prewarning may be especially important:

'like going back to what we were saying before about not being told when were gonna have the lessons like I get really shakey like uncontrollably shakey if people don't tell me about things' (Sid; 324-325)

Prewarning about lesson content provides opportunities for students to meet with school staff and seek alternative arrangements if required. Appropriate alternative arrangements suggested by participants included meeting with a Teaching Assistant and having the opportunity to leave lessons part way through:

'like if they said like a week in advance oh you're gonna do this then that would have been good cos if anyone was uncomfortable in with doing it and with doing that lesson and really felt really uncomfortable that they could they could speak to the teacher beforehand' (Mia; 158-160)

'it might not be like the right time cos say something happened in your family you might not be ready to learn about it' (Sid; 311-312)

Some participants also voiced having the autonomy to access support outside of timetabled RSE lessons would be useful:

'they'll just like say just leave the room and I'll come up and talk to you if you wanna be spoken to if you don't take your time' (Sage; 123-124)

'I just went back to the class at break time I came back in and made sure everyone was outside and asked about the thing so I feel like they could tell you they were going to be there at break time so if you did have any questions you can go tell them' (Sid; 105-107)

While there was consensus from participants that CYP should be prewarned about the lesson content, the experiences of participants such as Lila highlighted the need for careful monitoring to prevent disengagement:

'when they say it's gonna be wellbeing then literally like half the school doesn't turn up cause they know it's gonna be wellbeing day' (Lila; 96-97)

Participants in focus group one discussed in-class strategies to reduce feelings of discomfort and anxiety. The participants suggested that teachers should allow students to use emotional regulation strategies, such as fidget toys and stress balls, however participants' experiences suggested that use of such strategies may currently result in behavioural consequences in line with the whole school behaviour policies:

'when you are learning about an uncomfortable subject or sommet you find tricky for me it is better when I'm like fidgeting or doodling and it like helps me to concentrate more' (Kevina; 392-393)

'I feel like your form tutor should give you sommet to fidget with if you need it cos I don't know if you are allowed them so I always hide them under the desk' (Sid; 403-404)

Participants also discussed the importance of seating arrangements in fostering a sense of safety and comfort. Commonality across the datasets included CYP being able to sit next to those of the same sex; the researcher noted that this was of particular importance for female students. The researcher understood that while CYP prefer to sit with their friends, during RSE lessons, the sex of the student is more important:

'in PSHE I have to sit next to a boy um but luckily I've got a girl on the other side' (Mia; 66)

'I'm never really like that uncomfortable cos I have never sat next to a boy in a PSHE lesson' (Sage; 109-110)

'if everybody sat next to like a girl doesn't matter if it's a girl that they like or don't like...just as long as they sit next to a girl and then the boys sit next to a boy' (Mia; 70-72)

Subtheme 4.2: Respecting and fostering confidentiality facilitates participation

Across the datasets the researcher understood there to be a need for respecting and fostering confidentiality within the classroom environment. Participants reflected on 'classroom rules' which were presented at the start of the lesson. 'Rules' appeared to foster a sense of safety and respect and were there to prevent the disclosure of personal information outside the classroom:

'rules like I will not share this information outside of the classroom I will not like mock anyone else when they're sharing the stories I'll be respectful of um the teacher and the students' (Mia; 146-147)

in the beginning of any apex lesson there's always a slide on the board that says whatever is shared in this classroom stays in the classroom' (Kevina; 313-314)

Only one participant spoke about her experience of rules being co-created with students in the class; others implied rules were pre-determined by teachers and therefore enforced upon them:

'you have to like write your own rules that you'd that you follow but we all discuss them as a class' (Mia; 145-146)

'they give us like rules or like like rules to follow' (Sage; 121)

There appeared to be a disparity in conformity of rules, which the researcher felt reflected classroom management techniques. For some CYP, authoritarian style rules appeared to support positive classroom behaviours, while for others, perceived punishments and strict teaching styles did not appear to deter disruptive behaviours:

'that slide came up and I can't remember who it was but someone was making fun of it' (Kevina; 315-316

'people actually need to take them seriously' (Jack; 320)

'no one does and everyone just talks about it outside of class' (Lewis; 321)

Although a generalisation cannot be made, the researcher understood from Mia's experiences, that when rules were co-constructed with students, the classroom environment was likely to be more conducive to learning:

'it's like helpful because yes because everyone follows them because they know the punishments' (Mia; 149-150)

Participants reflected on the consequences of class rules being broken and confidential information being shared. Participants voiced concerns around feeling judged, teased and tormented by their peers outside the classroom setting:

'you might not wanna talk cos you are like oh if they say something to someone or and then it gets spread around and then there's rumours' (Julie; 290-291)

'someone said something and it got around the school and they got picked on for it and I can't remember who it was but I know it was one of my friends and I don't want that happening to me' (Kevina; 317-320)

Participants further discussed feelings of mockery and judgement within the classroom, when attempting to contribute ideas or answer questions. The researcher understood that the risk of judgement was one of the biggest barriers to engagement and participation:

'start like making fun of you' (Sid; 104)

'when you want to ask a question everyone just laughs more so then you just don't bother cos what's the point' (Lewis; 119-120)

The risk of ridicule, teasing and poor behaviours are not unique to participants in this study (Forrest et al., 2004; Strange et al., 2003).

Participants voiced that poor behaviour, such as laughter, hinders learning opportunities. Despite poor behaviour being initiated by the minority, and frequently blamed on male students, Jack reflected on the cyclical effect laughter has on whole class learning and engagement:

'it isn't a classroom environment where you can like learn because it's just stupid everyone just messes about and laughs and don't listen' (Jack; 117-118)

'it would be better if people wouldn't laugh coz if they start laughing and then they look around the class and then everyone else starts laughing, and then like people who want to learn then they will eventually start laughing as well' (Jack; 142-144)

The wider literature highlights the role and responsibility of teachers in managing classroom behaviours to prevent disruption to learning and engagement (Gillander Gådin & Stein, 2019; Strange et al., 2003).

Despite current barriers to engagement, participants reflected upon creative alternatives to facilitate participation. The researcher understood these to be underpinned by a need for discretion and non-disclosure of personal information (e.g., names). It was also suggested that participation may increase if CYP are given autonomy to decide how information is shared during class activities. A sense of ownership resonated throughout the discussions and appeared to foster feelings of safety and comfort:

'she'll like say the answer and she'll say who wrote them and it's really like I didn't really want you to say my name' (Kevina; 99-100)

'if we had questions we all put them in like a jar we fold them up and we put it in a jar and then he takes them home searches them up and then writes the answers on the sheet but our name's on the sheet so then he knows who to give it back too' (Keith; 215-218)

'think it was quite quite like good the way that they gave that they gave people the option to if they didn't wanna share it then they could just like get rid of it' (Mia; 39-40)

4.4 Sub-question: How do CYP experience the teaching of consent as part of the RSE curriculum?

4.4.1 Theme 5: Do children and young people really understand consent?

Across the datasets the researcher concluded that there was a disparity in participants' skills in communicating, interpreting, understanding and applying consent. Difficulties seemed apparent despite such skills forming part of the new secondary RSE reforms (DfE, 2019a). Theme 5 explores experiences at both a sematic and latent level (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to allow the researcher to explore underlying, implicit ideas around sexual consent.

For many the notion of consent seemed ambiguous, and when asked to define consent, participants appeared to struggle to describe consent beyond the terms 'yes' and 'no'. Participants' experiences suggested that there continues to be a heavy emphasis on the teaching of these words during RSE, despite wider literature recognising the nuances and complexity of applying consent to real world contexts (Brook et al., 2014; Sanjakdar & Yip,

2018). The experiences of participants in this study are not unique (Setty, 2021; Whittington, 2021).

A minority of participants were able to give more complex definitions and reflect on teaching practices. It is the voice of these participants which the researcher has captured below. The researcher acknowledges that the quotes presented may not be representative of all participants, however the researcher would suggest that difficulties in being able to discuss consent reflects several factors. These have been captured within three subthemes: *'Pedagogy practices for teaching consent requires improvement'; 'Teaching of consent is not viewed as a priority within RSE'; 'Difficulties defining and applying consent to real world contexts'.*

Subtheme 5.1: Pedagogy practices for teaching consent requires improvement

Participants' experiences implied that there is a heavy reliance on videos as a tool to teach sexual consent. The most popular video was titled '*Tea and Consent'*, referred to by participants as the *'cup of tea video'*. The researcher understood that tea is used as an analogy for consent.

The video appeared to draw parallels with the definition of consent outlined within the Sexual Offences Act (2003). Participants implied that consent should be freely given, verbalised, and should only be accepted when given by someone with capacity:

'basically if a person is unconscious they don't want a cup of tea so if somebody is unconscious then they don't wanna sleep with you basically' (Lila; 14-15)

'If you go into the kitchen and if someone asks for tea you go into the kitchen and you come back and they're like actually I don't want tea you don't have to force them' (Saul; 30-31)

'like if someone asks you do you want a cup of tea um and you just are silent then they're not just gonna make your cup of tea' (Felix; 161-162)

While the researcher understood there to be a consensus that the video is a helpful teaching tool, perhaps because it discusses topics relevant to CYP, the researcher sensed that participants did not feel the video was sufficient on its own. Participants suggested there should be additional conversations and practical activities to extend their learning:

'it is a bit rubbish that that's all they showed us' (Julie; 16-17)

'if you gonna do a video you need to explain more about it than just putting the video on'
(Sid; 382)

'we had like a five-minute conversation about what we thought the video meant and then
that was it' (Wendy; 39-40)

The wider literature recognises the importance of teaching resources facilitating conversations and relating teaching to real world contexts and social issues (Brady & Lowe, 2020). When teaching sexual consent, Kevina discussed the use of scenario-based situations:

'they said sommet like what if someone tried to pin you to the wall what would you do and
erm someone else said like I'd push them away and walk off or someone else said they like
kissed them and somebody else said sommet else, and it was kind of like OK what's the point
of this… most people said no erm but some people said yeah and it was kind of like a mixed
view in some people and it was kind of like why do we need to know this really' (Kevina, 338-
343)

In theory, scenario-based learning should be an effective teaching tool, as CYP are believed to learn best when knowledge is applied to real world contexts (Whittington, 2019b). However, the researcher understood from Kevina's narrative that the lesson lacked clarity, and misinformation was not addressed by the class teacher.

Only two participants reflected on successful lessons in which they had been taught about healthy and unhealthy relationships. '*Forming and Maintaining Respectful Relationships*' and '*Positive Relationships*' are taught alongside '*Consent*', as part of the PSHE Association Programme of Study for Key Stage 3 and 4. As such, the researcher felt it was important to briefly discuss CYP's views on these topics, as the findings could be used to further improve teaching around consent. Mia viewed successful lessons as those which involved practical, pupil-led activities:

'we made like a hot air balloon so like so in the top part the actual balloon part we wrote like
all the people that we have in a healthy relationship everyone we have a healthy relationship
with and in the lower part we we wrote all the people we had an unhealthy relationship'
(Mia; 14-17)

'we did some like drawing tasks and we drew we drew in a pair of glasses to um to say how we could identify an unhealthy relationship' (Mia; 31-32)

Successful lessons appeared to provide CYP with real world skills. Such skills included how to identify signs of respectful, positive relationships and how to support others. Sage reflected on how she applied knowledge gained during a RSE lesson to a real world situation:

'we spoke about like toxic relationships and healthy relationships and how spot a toxic relationship in your friend or how to like help someone in it' (Sage; 155-157)

'during the domestic violence thing um the boy like like he was like kept on like trying to impress her and stuff like like get around with his mates and I said like oh your boyfriend does that like I don't like him and like and you don't like him just break up with' (Sage; 159-161)

While Mia and Sage were able to reflect on positive teaching pedagogy, many participants expressed a lack of teaching around controlling and coercive relationships, emotional abuse and the psychological impact of being cheated on. The researcher understood that while there had been a lack of teaching around these topics, many participants had experience of controlling relationships. The experiences appeared to be normalised by participants. Participants voiced that they want to be taught how to act appropriately in a relationship, and how to treat their partners with respect:

'they don't teach us like how to act in a relationship' (Jack; 450)

'obviously got told that like domestic abuse but we never got taught about like mental and emotional abuse' (Wendy; 291-292)

The researcher concluded that CYP are utilising alternative sources of information for education because current pedagogy is viewed as insufficient. Participants discussed the use of television, social media, music, the internet and books. Sid discussed the social media platform Tik-Tok as a helpful source of information when learning about consent, however her experience suggests that information online may be more tailored towards female topics:

'like on Tik Tok I see a lots of things on what to do for girls and like how to be like a good girlfriend but there's a lot more about girls than there is about boys… I'm always on Tik Tok and I watch it a lot it's really good' (Sid; 452-455)

Only one participant discussed communicating consent with their parents. The researcher felt that while this was an exception, Sage's experience highlighted a potentially helpful way teachers could educate CYP on the importance of positive and active communication. The researcher felt that the use of a parental codeword, may help keep CYP safe in real world situations:

'have like a code word for one of your parents to say like I dunno say the codeword was like tea or something you'd just text them tea and they'd be like 'oh you need to come home right now' and no matter like what you say you have to come home' (Sage; 181-183)

Subtheme 5.2: Teaching of consent is not viewed as a priority within RSE

Participants of all ages appeared to find it difficult to reflect on their experiences of learning about consent, which suggested to the researcher that the content taught was not memorable, meaningful or in great enough depth:

'I don't really know uh cos like we barely touched we barely touched on the subject' (Felix; 168)

'honest that's all I can remember about consent like uh we really need to do more on it to be honest' (Felix; 199-200)

'it's a thing that goes over your head' (Kevina; 414)

The researcher's reflections were further supported by descriptions around the quality of teaching. Akin to the broader RSE curriculum, Julie and Lila described the consent curriculum as highly repetitive. Participants voiced frustrations around the quality of consent lessons, describing them as:

'in the politest possible way a waste of time' (Saul; 60)

'the lessons are just crap' (Jack; 420)

'to be fair what we have learnt on consent is fucking shit' (Trevor; 295)

Furthermore, participants' experiences suggested to the researcher that the quantity of teaching regarding consent was insufficient. Many participants explained that consent was often taught as part of a broad lesson objective. While some participants received a dedicated lesson on consent, their reflections suggested to the researcher that a standalone lesson was not sufficient:

'they kinda like brushed over the subject' (Mia; 104)

'we had like maybe two lessons on it probably not even that I think there's two lessons and other stuff mixed in' (Felix; 169-170)

'we did an entire lesson all about consent so that was good but um maybe not enough' (Sage; 19)

Drawing upon wider literature, (Bragg et al., 2021) the researcher concluded that there may not be an appropriate amount of time offered to educators to deliver the consent curriculum effectively.

In line with findings regarding the broader RSE curriculum, those participants who had been taught about consent voiced that consent had been taught too late. Several participants explained that they had not received information on consent until they were in Year 9, despite consent being a mandatory topic for CYP in Year 7 onwards (DfE, 2019a). Lila suggested that consent should be covered as part of the primary school curriculum. Felix further highlighted potential risks to CYP, if not in receipt of an age-appropriate education:

'uh well I thought they might have taught about consent uh because we didn't learn that until like year nine which think was a bit strange because obviously like before year nine children were more vulnerable to like not like knowing what consent is' (Felix; 40-42)

'wish it was more talked about maybe in primary or something even if it was just simple just get it out there' (Lila; 197-198)

'it's good to learn about the relationship stuff and the consent stuff quite like early on' (Sage 87-88)

Consequences of a lack of taught consent were also raised by Lila and Wendy. The researcher understood there to be a perceived connection between a lack of knowledge and negative, non-consensual sexual activities:

'you hear a lot about stuff about some things happening to girls from like other schools and it makes you think what have they been taught about consent…quite a few do have negative experiences with people and consent so maybe it should be talked about more' (Lila; 249-253)

'if people aren't taught about it they're not gonna know so they're not gonna know it's wrong necessarily' (Wendy; 79-80)

The researcher understood there was an underlying view held by participants suggesting that consent had been taught in such way which left CYP feeling fearful of entering sexual relationships. The extract from focus group two highlights perceived concerns around navigating consent:

'in year ten they kind of just said all of this is unhealthy and it kind of scared lots of people into getting into relationships you know' (Saul; 299-300)

'they never ever tell you about happy relationships with you' (Trevor; 302)

'it's always about toxic people and not getting consent and getting scared to get into relationships' (Wendy; 303-304)

Within the wider literature it has been suggested that consent is often seen as a '*burden'* by CYP. To address this narrative it has been suggested that consent may be better taught alongside sex positive topics (Setty, 2021), such as those discussed in subtheme 1.2.

In addition to a lack of teaching, there also appeared to be perceived a lack of support around sexual consent and healthy and unhealthy relationships. Several participants vocalised a lack of support in schools (Wendy, Jeffrey and Jack). The exception was Sage who had been signposted to support offered outside the school context:

'end of the video it was like all like all the slides and stuff of like the numbers to call' (Sage; 59-60)

Considering what is understood around the importance of trust, rapport and relationships discussed in Chapter Three, the researcher concluded that current support may not be viewed as appropriate by CYP.

Subtheme 5.3 Difficulties defining and applying consent to real world contexts
Participants' experiences suggested to the researcher that CYP have been taught that consent involves asking '*permission*' and '*checking*' agreement:

'making sure you've got permission and that you don't do anything without it' (Sandra; 6)

'how it's super important to get permission' (Sage; 17)

'you ask it to the person you intend on having sexual intercourse with just check if it's if they're okay' (Saul; 4-5)

'we just kept getting told like ask and make sure it's OK' (Lewis; 334)

While there was a collective agreement that CYP should '*get*' rather than '*give*' consent (Brook et al., 2014) through verbal communication, participants' experiences suggested to the researcher that non-consensual activities do not always involve verbal communication:

'you don't even say yes like like silence isn't a yes is it' (Felix; 161)

'someone might seem like they want to but if they haven't specifically said don't do anything' (Wendy; 8)

The importance of positive and active communication has been highlighted in the wider literature (Brook et al., 2014; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012).

The researcher understood that consent is predominantly taught in relation to the physical act of sex. Only a handful of participants spoke about the application of consent to situations other than sexual intercourse. Julia and Lila's discussion highlights this reflection:

'not even sex just kissing' (Lila; 161)

'yeah true' (Julie; 162)

'touching anything' (Lila; 163)

'any form of physical sexual contact' (Julie; 164)

'that's another thing it shows how little they talk about stuff because I forgot like when you said about it not just being sex it being any form of contact like' (Julie; 169-170)

'yeah they just talk about sex don't they there always on about say yes say no sex it's always that' (Lila; 171-172)

Some participants alluded to the notion that consent may differ depending on the nature of the relationship, for example whether it is deemed a 'serious relationship' (Kevina and Lewis) and depending on whether there are feelings of 'attraction':

'if somebody like violently pushed you to a wall or sommet or did sommet you'd immediately like get away and if you were like attracted to this person or had like a crush on them or whatever you probably kiss them wouldn't you' (Kevina; 344-346)

Participants' experiences suggest that skills in being able to manage consensual activities are dependent on the age and experience of CYP. Younger participants discussed worries around misinterpreting consent in the real world, and voiced a lack of understanding about what they deem is *'right and wrong'*:

'cos if it is your first time you don't know if it's meant if it is right or wrong what's happening you re erm you're in an awkward position you don't necessarily know what's going to happen cos if it is someone that has done it before they could necessarily rape you without realising' (Sid; 423-425)

'what's right and wrong like things like consent like what should be consented too' (Jack; 44-45)

Some participants could recognise that consent can be withdrawn during sexual activities and that consent can change during a sexual activity. Wendy implied that there is a level of responsibility on the individual's sexual partner to be able to accurately interpret and monitor consent:

'if like someone says that they they want like they say yes at first and they can change their mind and that's all right' (Sage; 21-22)

'pay attention because midway through they might not say anything but if someone don't wanna do it anymore the chance are you'll be able to tell' (Wendy; 9-10)

These experiences appear to align with the wider literature, which has highlighted that CYP often view consent as multifaceted and context specific (Setty, 2021).

While some participants recognised that consent can be withdrawn, the researcher understood that the withdrawal of consent in real world contexts can be challenging, particularly if the individual has previously engaged in a sexual activity:

'when you're older and you're making out with someone and they tried to have sex with you and you didn't want to I'd feel like because we had been doing that then you'd like have too'
(Sid; 280-281)

'you're making out and then he or she starts to doing something or whoever and then you've got to feel like you can say no' (Lewis; 286-287)

Participants reflected on some of the pressures CYP face, which may contribute to increased engagement in sexual activities. The researcher understood pressures to be around a sense of belonging. Participants spoke about expectations from friends, a need to fit in and worries about letting partners down. There was also a suggestion that popularity increases pressure:

'feel like a lot of people like around our age just have sex cos they think it's what they should be doing cos all their mates are doing it rather than thinking oh I want to it's more oh I feel like I have to' (Julie; 255-257)

'I think it depends on who you hang around with because personally I don't think we feel pressure cos we're like a small thing but whereas popular people you do see a recurring thing like going through loads of relationships talking to loads of people' (Lila; 268-270)

'if a girl didn't want to have sex proceeded to have sex with and then like she might feel pressured into talking about it because of what or how the boyfriend might react' (Saul; 82-84)

'I'd feel like too erm it would feel you were disappointing then if I said no' (Sid; 278-279)

Participants voiced a need to be taught how to say 'no' in real world situations. The researcher understood that participants wanted greater levels of autonomy in saying 'no',

and felt they needed skills and techniques to be able to say 'no' effectively, without experiencing feelings of guilt or worry:

'I feel like they need to like drill it into our brains that you don't have to say yes erm and like definitely ways out of saying erm like no' (Sage; 173-174)

'what happens then you said no and it's not working they don't tell you what to do if I doesn't work they just say say no if you don't want it and say yes if you do but what happens if you try and it's aint working' (Sid; 365-367)

The pressures to act on sexual advances, and a perceived lack of skill in being able to manage such pressures, are not unique to the experience of participants within this study (Forrest et al., 2004; Hirst, 2004; Strange et al., 2003; Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016).

The researcher understood that contextual factors, such as the use of alcohol and drugs, had been taught to differing degrees within school settings. Only one participant (Sage) voiced that she had received an education on alcohol safety:

'they haven't really like told us anything about it like how it can affect sex' (Kevina, 439)

'we don't get taught like how like it's not okay to accept consent from someone if they're that drunk' (Wendy; 87-88)

'like with alcohol you kinda like lose your mind so we did that and like how to be more safe with it' (Sage; 14-15)

Chapter 5- Discussion

The study collected qualitative data from 15 participants, through individual interviews and small focus groups, to explore CYP's lived experiences of the RSE curriculum in secondary schools. The study aimed to answer two research questions, informed by literature presented within Chapter Two:

- *What are CYP's experiences of the RSE curriculum?*

- *How do CYP experience the teaching of consent, as part of the RSE curriculum?*

The researcher has chosen to summarise the lived experiences of participants as captured in Chapter Four, before evaluating the current study's strengths and limitations. The main body of the discussion will offer the reader, school staff, policy makers, Government officials and EPs a comprehensive understanding of the practical applications and implications of the current findings. This could be considered a third-order interpretation of the data as the researcher has drawn on the voiced experiences of participants (first-order interpretations) and the researcher's analytical interpretations (second-order interpretations). Atkins and colleagues (2008) operationalised a third order interpretation as an ''interpretations of interpretations of interpretations'. By presenting the discussion in this way, the researcher hopes the chapter can be used to inform future pedagogy practices and advocate for the voice of CYP.

5.1 Summary of main research findings

Through a process of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021), the researcher developed four overarching themes in response to the main research question, *'What are CYP's experiences of the RSE curriculum?',* and one overarching theme in response to the sub-question, '*How do CYP experience the teaching of consent, as part of the RSE curriculum?'.* Participants' lived experiences, and the researcher's analytical interpretations, are summarised below.

5.1.1 What does the qualitative data and analytical interpretations tell us about CYP's experiences of the RSE curriculum?

Theme one was conceptualised as *'a conflict of interest between espoused practice and policy and a curriculum important to CYP'*. Within this theme the researcher understood that curriculum content is perceived by CYP as unfit for purpose. Differences were noted in content outlined within policy guidance (DfE, 2019a) and the curriculum which appears to be received by CYP. The experiences of participants suggested that the curriculum is

perceived to be gendered, heteronormative and sex negative. Participants suggested that topics important to them are not covered at an appropriate age time, if at all. Participants' experiences suggested a lack of prioritisation of the RSE curriculum in comparison to core subjects, such as English and Maths. A perceived lack of teaching appeared further exasperated by disruptions to CYP's education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theme two captured the view that '*current teaching practices do not align with CYP's preferred methods'.* Participants' experiences suggested that CYP are viewed by teachers as passive recipients of information; the reliance on videos as a teaching tool appeared to engrain such perceptions. Participants' experiences suggested that they would prefer greater opportunities for discussions and conversations within RSE lessons. Participants suggested teachers should utilise age-appropriate activities and empower the voice of students. The experiences of participants also suggested that current teaching practices do not provide CYP with terminology used to navigate real world contexts.

Theme three focused on '*a perceived lack of trust, confidentiality and lack of positive student-teacher relationships'*. Participants' experiences suggested that there is a perceived lack of trust and confidentiality when seeking support and guidance from teachers within the school setting. Participants' experiences suggested that they would prefer to be taught by external educators as a disconnect can be created between the student-educator, however when seeking support and guidance, pre-established positive student-teacher relationships felt important for many participants. External educators were also viewed as more skilled, knowledgeable and educated than current teachers of RSE. The experiences of participants highlighted the role of systems and networks (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Steinberg & Morris, 2001) in facilitating or hindering access to sexual knowledge and emotional support.

Theme four highlighted that '*the classroom environment does not enable feelings of safety and comfort'*. The experiences of participants suggested that considerations and reasonable adjustments should be made prior to the delivery of RSE content, by working collaboratively with CYP to ensure individual needs are met, and adjustments to do not result in sanctions. Participants' experiences suggested that feeling unsafe and uncomfortable during RSE lessons hinders participation and engagement in learning, often resulting in poor classroom behaviours.

5.1.2 What does the qualitative data and analytical interpretations tell us about CYP's experiences of teaching around sexual consent?

Theme five questioned '*do CYP really understand consent*?'. Participants' experiences suggested that teaching around sexual consent requires improvement to ensure that CYP feel skilled in communicating, interpreting, understanding and applying consent in real world contexts. Participants' experiences suggested that current pedagogy practices may not sufficiently explore the nuances and complexity of consent. Pedagogy practices, teaching resources, skills of educators and appropriate time and space were deemed important by participants, when receiving taught content on consent.

5.2 Evaluation of the current study

The following section will evaluate the strengths and limitations of the study to allow the reader to contextualise methodological decisions made (Nowell et al., 2017). The researcher will begin by noting their positionality and then present a methodological critique referencing principles outlined by Yardley (2017), Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021).

5.2.1 The researcher's positionality

Given the nature of qualitative research and the researcher's critical realist positioning, the researcher acknowledges the subjectivity of the individual experiences of participants within the study. The researcher recognises her interpretations and conclusions may differ from the interpretations of others (Willig, 2017). To enhance the transferability and transparency of the current study, the researcher has reflected on her own perceptions and how these may impact on the interpretation of participants' experiences.

As with much social science research, the researcher was emotionally invested in the research topic (Holland, 2007; Johnson, 2009) which added an emotive layer to the already high academic demands of completing a doctoral thesis. While the research was driven by personal curiosity, there was also a gap within the wider literature, thus strengthening the study rationale. The researcher aimed to address personal influences by:

1. *Keeping a reflexive log*: The reflexive log allowed the researcher to recognise the role she played within the study. The log encouraged a state of openness (Braun & Clarke, 2021), supporting the credibility and confirmability of findings (Lincoln & Guba,

1985). The log was also an effective tool for managing emotions (Cunliffe, 2016) as the researcher reflected on how she felt after each interview and focus group.

2. *Affording appropriate time to data collection*: Given the potentially sensitive nature of the study, the researcher allowed sufficient time between data collection to process emotional reactions to participants' lived experiences (Hubbard, 2001).

3. *Minimising power imbalances*: To ensure participants felt heard and valued, the researcher spent time volunteering at the youth groups. This allowed her to build a research relationship with participants, thus reducing potential power imbalances as an 'outsider' to the group (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007).

4. *Engaging in supervision*: The researcher sought support and supervision from her academic tutor. Her supervisor supported skill development, and provided emotional support (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). Supervision notes were kept, increasing credibility and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

5.2.2. Critical reflection of the participant sample

The sample comprised 15 participants; eight used she/her pronouns, and seven used he/him. Quantitative researchers, or those who adopt alternative epistemological positionings (e.g., positivist), may feel the sample is unrepresentative and regard this a limitation. However, within qualitative research, the sample's '*representativeness'* is not deemed an appropriate evaluative parameter (Patton, 2002). Participants were recruited based on a predetermined inclusion criterion (see section 3.5.1) and demographic information was gathered and tabulated to aid transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) of findings (see Table 5).

The researcher aimed to recruit participants of all genders, sexualities, age and ethnic backgrounds. Given the method of recruitment and the geographical location of the youth groups, it is probable to assume participants were pooled from a small number of schools. While similarities in lived experiences were noted, readers should be aware that experiences are unique to individual school contexts. Therefore, when considering transferability of findings, wider contextual factors should be considered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017; Patton, 2002).

All participants identified themselves as White British, therefore this study is most helpful in understanding the lived experiences of this specific population. A lack of representation may be partly explained by the demographic of the LA in which the research took place. Further work is needed to explore the lived experiences of pupils from other ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. This is important to ensure educators are sensitive to individual backgrounds (Greening, 2017), and that policy is informative and relevant (Graff et al, 2018). When considering the transferability of findings, readers should consider to what extent the demographics of participants reflect those they work with.

CYP were discouraged from participating if they felt the study topic may provoke a distressing emotional response. As such, this population may be unaccounted for within the current study. Future studies should aim to capture the lived experiences of this population to ensure no one voice is marginalised. Ethically this would require a teacher of high skill and sensitivity to personal circumstances.

Although there are potential limitations to the transferability of findings, the researcher has attempted to capture the voice of all participants who took part, and has offered suggestions on how future work may address these limitations.

5.2.3. Critical reflection of the research methodology

RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021) allowed the researcher to explore shared patterns of meaning across individual interviews and focus groups of varying sizes. The flexibility of the method enabled the researcher to co-construct a comfortable space for participants to share their lived experiences. The quality of the datasets suggested to the researcher that participants were honest and open, thus demonstrating several strengths of the study. The researcher attempted to address potential power imbalance by volunteering. The researcher positioned data collection outside of the school to create a safe, reflexive space, and offered check-ins and comfort breaks. The researcher also asked participants to co-create a 'confidentiality and privacy agreement' to foster a sense of security, respect and trust.

The researcher's interpersonal skills, developed during TEP training, were used to facilitate discussion. During data collection, the researcher embraced silences to allow quieter participants time to share their experiences, whilst during data analysis, the researcher presented quotes which capture the views of all participants to ensure no one voice was

prioritised or silenced. While the researcher aimed to mitigate power imbalances, the researcher acknowledges the methodology may have resulted in the loss of individual stories. Future studies may choose to adopt a methodology such as IPA, which may better capture rich personal stories.

After data collection was ceased, participants were offered the chance to speak to the researcher and youth group staff in a less formalised environment. Focus group one asked to discuss topics further, as they felt they had not had such opportunities before. While not a foreseen next step, the youth group staff invited an external speaker from the healthcare service to talk to CYP (attendance was not compulsory).

While there are several strengths of the current methodology, the researcher recognises she is a novice to qualitative research and therefore there exist areas for development. During data collection, the researcher felt her confidence increase over time. The use of a pilot interview may have allowed the researcher to trial questions and sit comfortably with participants leading discussions. A pilot interview may also have developed the phraseology of questions regarding sexual consent. On reflection, the timing of data collection may have limited CYP's responses. At the time of data collection, Year 7 participants had only received around two months of secondary school teaching, and therefore most of their experiences were focused on primary school experiences. As such, the reader should interpret conclusions with contextual caution. Future research may be needed to consider the longevity and transferability of findings.

5.2.4 Additional qualitative considerations for the reader

To ensure transparency (Yardley, 2017), the researcher has aimed to present a clear description of the study's methodology, while providing a detailed paper trail within the appendices, to enhance rigour (Yardley, 2017). Transparency and commitment are further evidenced by Braun and Clarke's 15-point checklist (see Table 8).

The researcher spent a prolonged period of time engaged in the research process, demonstrating credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), commitment and rigour (Yardley, 2017). From initial proposal to submission took around 18 months. The researcher afforded substantive time to ensure initial codes and themes were revisited and linked to the original datasets. Given the structure of the doctoral training course, the researcher undertook her

literature review before data collection. While the researcher aimed to take an inductive approach to analysis, the researcher acknowledges previous engagement with the literature may have indirectly led to her affording more meaning to certain sections of the analysis.

5.2.5 Quality of research summary

The researcher felt that there are many strengths of the study, despite being a relatively novice qualitative researcher. The researcher felt that the methodology has dependability, confirmability and credibility because of measures taken such as reflexive logging, audit trails and use of supervision. Additionally, the demographic information collected about participants, found in Table 5, is hoped to support the transferability of findings for future researchers.

5.3 Implications for school staff, educators and policy makers: How can the research inform future RSE pedagogy practice?

This section of the chapter will aim to offer a comprehensive understanding of the practical applications and implications of the current findings, which could be used to inform future pedagogy practices. These suggestions may be helpful for school staff, including teachers and senior leaders, as well as policy makers and Government officials. Evaluating the study's importance and impact is a valuable quality measure of qualitative research (Yardley, 2017).

The researcher considered structuring the discussion in line with themes and subthemes drawn from data collection, however Braun and Clarke (2021) suggest that this approach risks the reader receiving a repetition of information already understood. Instead, the researcher has chosen to present findings under the following four subheadings:

- *When do CYP want to be taught about RSE and sexual consent?*

- *What do CYP want to be taught as part of the RSE curriculum?*

- *Who do CYP want to teach the RSE curriculum?*

- *How do CYP want to be taught about RSE and sexual consent?*

Each subheading will be linked to relevant themes and subthemes, drawing upon the wider literature and Government policy. Where appropriate, reflective comments will draw comparisons between espoused policy and practice and the researcher's perceptions of

participants' experiences. Summative conclusions alongside suggestions for future research will be offered in Chapter Six.

5.3.1 When do CYP want to be taught about RSE and sexual consent?

5.3.1.1 CYP want teaching earlier

When reflecting on their experiences of the RSE curriculum, participants discussed the timing in which the curriculum is delivered. Participants' accounts indicated that in general, topics covered as part of the secondary RSE curriculum are perceived to be taught too late in their education (see subtheme 1.3). Participants acknowledged that the RSE curriculum content should be delivered when they are younger, and that more time should be afforded to ensuring teaching is offered to a sufficient quality.

Similarly, participants voiced that teaching around sexual consent should also be earlier (see subtheme 5.2); currently teaching around consent and healthy sexual relationships is only mandatory for secondary aged pupils (Greening, 2017). The findings from the study led the researcher to conclude that younger participants did not appear to have the same level of understanding or language skills as older participants, since they demonstrated greater difficulties in interpreting and navigating consent. The researcher would suggest that earlier teaching may support younger pupils to develop the skills needed to navigate and apply consent to real world experiences. This is important, as findings from this study, and the wider literature, recognise that CYP rarely feel skilled in navigating the complexities of real-life situations (Brook et al., 2014). The researcher would suggest that more time and space should be offered to ensure teaching around consent is delivered sufficiently and effectively (Bragg et al., 2021).

5.3.1.2 Timings should align to the developmental age, experience and maturity of CYP

When considering the broader RSE curriculum, there were several indicators that topics taught as part of the secondary curriculum do not always align to the developmental age, experience, or maturity of CYP. Participants' accounts indicated that they felt the RSE curriculum content was not always age appropriate, as it was delivered too late. Several participants explained that taught content should reflect real world personal experiences, such as starting puberty and beginning sexual relationships.

To support feelings of safety and comfort in the classroom, it may also be helpful for educators to adopt a non-judgemental position when teaching RSE, by recognising that

some CYP may be ready, or already engaging, in sexual activities (Carmody, 2015; Robinson, 2012). Similarly, educators should also be aware of, and be sensitive to, increasing levels of maturity of CYP (Unis & Sällström, 2020). Wider literature recognises the value of CYP having access to an education which offers them the skills and knowledge to safely navigate the developmental period of adolescence (Allen, 2008; Robinson, 2012). Applying these findings to the classroom setting, the researcher suggests that educators may consider adapting lesson content, resources and pedagogy approaches to ensure provision and materials are developmentally appropriate (Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2012).

The findings suggest that the timing of RSE is particularly important for students in Year 9 and 10. Participants voiced a greater need for education during this period of adolescence, as this is the time when CYP appear to begin to explore sexual and non-sexual relationships. Participants' experiences suggested a perceived lack, and in some cases reduction, in teaching during this period of development. The thinking of social cognitive and psychosocial developmental models is that during older adolescence (around 15 -16 years of age) YP begin to develop a social self, a personal identity and also become more competent at managing sexual behaviours (Choudhury et al., 2006; Erikson, 1936). Using theories of development with which to inform practice highlights the potential importance of a developmental age-appropriate curriculum (Dombrowski et al., 2007).

5.3.1.3 Learning should build on foundational knowledge

There was a conscious reflection by some participants that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted upon their experiences of RSE (see subtheme 1.4). Participants discussed a limited experience of RSE during this period, which suggested to the researcher that RSE was not prioritised. The findings from this study provide evidence for the work of Kantor and colleagues (2020). They hypothesised that sex education would not be prioritised as part of the national shift to online learning, given how little attention sex education has previously received. Furthermore, they hypothesised that even when in-person schooling returned, RSE would receive less attention than '*academic'* subjects. The researcher believes that both hypotheses are evidenced by the lived experiences of participants in this study.

While further work is required to explore the long-term effects of COVID-19 on RSE, findings from this study could be used to inform current pedagogy. Participants suggested that topics missed due to the pandemic should be revisited, namely lessons around contraception and

safe sex. When considering government legislation, the researcher would suggest that it is vital that curriculum content is revisited, as the curriculum was designed using sequential building blocks to ensure CYP are best able to make well-informed sexual decisions (DfE, 2019a).

Educators should also be mindful of the age at which CYP began secondary school. As England went into lockdown in March 2020, it is likely younger children may have missed content taught at the end of primary school, while children currently in Year 9 and 10 are likely to have missed content covered as part of the Key Stage 3 'Relationship and Sex Education' curriculum.

Conclusion: In summary, findings from the current study suggest participants feel the timing of RSE does not reflect the developmental age, experience or maturity of CYP. The researcher's analytical interpretations suggest that the RSE curriculum, including sexual consent, should be taught earlier. For lessons to be successful it is understood that additional time should be afforded to educators. CYP would like content to be more frequent, with additional learning during Year 9 and 10. The findings suggest that the curriculum should sensitively recognise the likelihood of increased sexual experiences of older adolescents during this period. Finally, it may be helpful for CYP to revisit missed learning opportunities, disrupted by the pandemic. While only a small proportion of the study's findings, the researcher believes that qualitative, post-pandemic data is a novel contribution to the wider literature.

5.3.2 What do CYP want to be taught as part of the RSE curriculum?

When reflecting on their experiences of the RSE curriculum and teaching of consent, participants discussed current curriculum content and additional topics they wished to be covered. Participants' accounts indicated that the current RSE curriculum is often over simplified, repetitive and monotonous and therefore perceived as not memorable nor meaningful. Participants voiced frustrations around the quality of lessons regarding sexual consent, perceiving topics to be recurring and lacking in detail. Despite Government reforms (DfE, 2019a) to improve the RSE curriculum, the researcher would suggest findings from the current study depict a curriculum not dissimilar to that portrayed and criticised in 2013 (Ofsted, 2013).

5.3.2.1 An inclusive curriculum

Theme one suggested a disconnect between espoused practice outlined in legislation (DfE, 2019a) and the curriculum perceived to be received by CYP. Participants' accounts indicated a gendered, heteronormative curriculum (see subtheme 1.1) which the researcher understood does not currently reflect the individual needs of CYP. Participants, and the wider research, recognise that it is important to teach a curriculum which is sensitive and inclusive of all sexualities and genders (Dombrowski et al., 2007; Greening, 2017).

Participant's accounts suggested that the priority of the LGBTQ+ curriculum receives differing levels of attention and status by educators. The researcher felt this to be a pertinent finding given the number of CYP who identified themselves as bisexual. Participants' accounts indicated that some schools are striving for inclusivity by prioritising teaching on LGBTQ+ rights, while others felt teaching and support remains tokenistic. These findings support the Stonewall School Report (Stonewall, 2017), which noted that same-sex relationships are often marginalised in school because of a lack of teaching. The researcher would suggest that current practices do not align to the 2010 Equality Act, nor the reformed RSE curriculum (DfE, 2019a), which outline that CYP should be offered an education which incorporates teaching on same-sex relationships.

While the DfE (2019a, p15) guidance outlines that '*secondary schools should include LGBT content in their teaching*', there is very limited guidance on how this should be delivered within schools. The guidance states that '*schools are free to determine how they do this'.* The researcher would suggest a lack of guidance may begin to explain some of the variation noted across participants' experiences. The findings suggest there may be a need to streamline how to curriculum is taught in the future, by offering educators clearer guidance and support. This is important to ensure CYP do not receive conflicting information from multiple sources which has previously been noted to be detrimental to understanding (Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2012; MacDowell & Mitchell, 2006).

5.3.2.2 Accessible age-appropriate language

Participants' experiences suggested a desire to want to use curriculum specific terminology when discussing genitalia in RSE lessons (see subtheme 2.3). It was alluded to by several participants that teaching such language may reduce the risk of unwanted sexual advances or miscommunication between CYP and adults when seeking support.

The wider literature reflects participants' perceptions, noting specific terminology provides clarity when disclosing sexual abuse or non-consensual sexual experiences (Deblinger et al., 2001; Kenny et al., 2008). Teaching children the correct terminology for their genitalia has been advised by the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY, 2019). The use of such terminology is understood to support CYP taking ownership over their genitalia, as well as equipping CYP with terminology to keep themselves safe. Teaching is also believed to facilitate open conversations. Within the current study, participants highlighted the importance of conversations (see subtheme 2.2) in creating safe classroom environments where the use of such terminology is viewed as the norm. Some participants even suggested that normalising language in the classroom may help to support societal shifts in attitudes.

While participants appeared to want educators to use terminology for genitalia, participants did not want learning to be focused on '*complicated scientific terminology*'. The researcher understood there to be an equilibrium between curriculum specific terminology and language deemed accessible and appropriate by CYP. In practice, the researcher would suggest a successful educator is able to bridge the gap between the two constructs, by creating a language rich classroom environment which allows complex elements of RSE to be discussed (Kehily, 2002). In practice, it may be helpful for educators to have discussions with pupils around the language they feel would facilitate a comfortable classroom environment that also facilitates effective learning.

5.3.2.3 Language which support real world sexual communication

As there was no definition of consent within the DfE (2019a) guidance, the researcher adopted the definition outlined within the Sexual Offences Act (2003), to guide her interpretations of sexual consent. This allowed a latent approach to analysis, and exploration of participants' use of language (see subtheme 5.3). While some participants' definitions of consent appeared to align to Section 74 of the Sexual Offences Act (2003), the researcher concluded that many participants appeared to find it difficult to define consent beyond the terms 'yes' or 'no'.

Despite a wealth of literature recognising that positive and effective communication minimises the risk of miscommunication (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012) and supports CYP to develop skills needed to navigate real world sexual contexts (Gilbert, 2017), the researcher would suggest that the experiences of participants in this study may demonstrate that

current teaching practices fall short in equipping CYP with effective language skills. This finding supports research of almost 20 years' standing that demonstrates RSE often fails to provide students with appropriate language to navigate conversations (Forrest et al., 2004; Hirst, 2004).

Difficulties in defining consent may have implications for practice. The researcher would suggest educators should move away from simply teaching pupils to say 'yes' or 'no' (Brook et al., 2014) and instead consider the complexities and nuances of verbal and nonverbal communication. This pedagogy may support CYP's understanding that consent can be withdrawn during sexual activities and that consent can change during a sexual activity.

Such teaching may also address the voice of participants who wanted to learn how to say 'no' in real world contexts. Having the skills and techniques to be able to say 'no' effectively, as well as cope with pressures from peers and society without experiencing guilt or worry, was understood to be important for many CYP. The findings suggest that, in practice, it may be helpful for CYP to be taught an extended curriculum which offers skills that would enable them to better manage pressures. Although there is a lack of guidance for educators, the findings suggest that the Sexual Offences Act (2003) may be a useful tool to guide discussion and support CYP to develop skills for navigating consent, so they can feel free to 'agree by choice' to sexual activities.

5.3.2.4 A sex positive curriculum

Participants voiced a desire to be taught topics important to them, such as pleasure, masturbation, kinks and how to improve their sex lives (see subtheme 1.2). These topics are not currently covered within the secondary RSE curriculum. The findings from this study resonate with the views of CYP who took part in studies in the early 2000's (Forrest et al., 2004; Hirst, 2004; Strange et al., 2003), which suggest to the researcher that there has been little shift in the curriculum over time to ensure it aligns to the preferences of CYP.

Participants' narratives suggested to the researcher that they felt let down by the current curriculum. The researcher understood that there are few opportunities for CYP to discuss 'sex positive' topics within schools, as sexual activities are deemed risky, potentially because of educators' terminology usage. When considering RSE policy, the researcher infers that negative language is used more commonly than positive language. For example, the policy

states that pupils should be taught *'strategies for identifying and managing sexual pressure'* and *'how to enjoy intimacy without sex'* (DfE, 2019a, p, 29.). Further research, such as a discursive analysis of RSE policy and guidance, may offer insight into the impact of language on CYP's perceptions of the RSE curriculum.

Although some readers may hold moral or ethical dilemmas as to whether 'sex positive' topics should be taught, the literature suggests that when topics are viewed as 'taboo' they become increasingly appealing to CYP and consequently CYP are more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviours (Ernst et al., 2006). Risk taking behaviours are believed to reduce when CYP are kept well informed, and when sexual activities are normalised (Aggleton & Thomas, 2016; Ernst, et al., 2006). Sex positive research highlights the need for sexual activities to be seen as *'normal rather than shameful'* (Allen, 2011). The researcher understood that when RSE content is viewed as 'taboo', participants withdraw from support and participate less in lessons. Utilising theories of adolescent development, it could be suggested that CYP are experiencing an internal conflict, and to protect their self-identity (Erikson, 1963) they are seen to withdrawn from support and lessons.

In practice, the findings from this study suggest that risks should be reframed. RSE lessons may instead choose to focus on positive consensual sexual experiences (Alldred & David, 2007; McGeeney, 2015; Sanjakdar & Yip, 2018). CYP may find it helpful to be taught consent alongside healthy relationships and topics such as pleasure (Carmody, 2015; Setty, 2021). It may be helpful to reframe negative constructions of sex and pleasure, and instead provide CYP with a safe space to facilitate open conversations; research suggests that sexual knowledge is best acquired in a safe and supportive environment (Pilcher, 2004). When CYP are appropriately educated, CYP are less likely to engage in risk taking behaviours (Blake & Jolly, 2002) because they have the skills to make well informed, responsible decisions (DfEE, 2000).

Conclusion: In summary, findings from the current study suggest participants feel the curriculum is highly gendered and heteronormative, focusing too often on complicated scientific terminology. Participants also perceive the curriculum to be risky and taboo. The researcher's analytical interpretations suggest that it may be helpful to reconsider the curriculum to ensure it provides CYP with the skills and knowledge to manage relationships.

Successful pedagogy may choose to focus on sex positive topics, and educators and CYP may work together to construct appropriate language used to frame RSE topics.

5.3.3 Who do CYP want to teach the RSE curriculum?

5.3.3.1 Professionally skilled educators
When reflecting on their experiences of being taught about RSE and consent, participants spoke about current educators and preferred educators (see subtheme 3.1). Participants explained that in secondary schools they are taught RSE by either a male or female teacher. Participants vocalised that they would like to be taught by a teacher of the same sex, and by someone from an external agency. Most commonly nurses were seen as knowledgeable experts by CYP. The researcher understood external educators allow a disconnect between student-teacher relationships.

Participants perceived skilled teachers as those creatively utilising teaching resources who expand learning beyond that provided by video content. Participants appeared to favour teachers who could offer multiple explanations and relate learning to real life contexts. The findings of the study are akin to the wider literature which recognises that while the form of RSE materials is important, its' success is based on teacher delivery (Lodge et al., 2022; Pound et al, 2016).

In practice, for lessons to be viewed as successful by CYP, it is understood that educators should show a comprehensive understanding of the curriculum content and be able to communicate it clearly to CYP (Kehily, 2002; Schaalma et al., 2004). Favourable educators were perceived by participants as 'knowledgeable' and 'skilled', while less favourable educators were viewed as 'awkward' and 'not confident'. The wider literature highlights that successful teaching of consent requires strong skills on the part of the educator to manage conversations and potential disclosures (Bragg et al., 2021; Hirst, 2008).

5.3.3.2 Opportunities to upskill teachers
Although not explicitly explored within the current study, the wider literature recognises that teachers often feel unskilled in delivering sex education. Feeling unskilled is attributed to a lack of confidence and resources (Abbott et al., 2016; Garbutt, 2008), and a lack of time and competence to facilitate sensitive classroom discussions (Gilbert, 2017; Pound et al., 2017; Whittington, 2019b). The wider literature recognises that many educators feel anxious

and uncertain about making decisions regarding RSE, due to a lack of support, structure and leadership at a whole school level (Alldred & David, 2007; Mason, 2010; Renold, 2000).

A recognition of the need for greater teacher training to ensure teachers feel confident delivering RSE as part of a whole school approach to safeguarding, was outlined by Ofsted (2013). The DfE's impact assessment (DfE, 2019c) further outlined that in all schools, one teacher from each Key Stage would receive 10 hours of initial teacher training. The experiences of participants suggested that teachers continue to feel unconfident delivering RSE; this is evidenced by teachers avoiding topics such as sexual consent, and a reliance on the use of videos as teaching tools. The findings suggest that there may need to be improvements in the delivery of RSE by upskilling teachers and providing further training.

5.3.3.3 Teachers who create a safe classroom environment

Participants' accounts indicated that favourable teachers were those who empowered the voice of CYP by creating a safe classroom environment to share ideas. Effective classroom managements skills were also deemed important, as participants shared concerns around being mocked or judged when contributing to lessons. In practice, the findings suggest that effective classroom management is important to facilitate participation. The wider literature recognises that teachers are important facilitators of the successful implementation of RSE (Schutte et al., 2016).

Within the classroom, it may be helpful for educators to consider potential power imbalances between themselves and their students, and between students and their peers. It may also be helpful to consider the age of the students and the topics which are to be discussed. The findings suggest it is the teacher's responsibility to create a safe classroom environment to enable CYP to learn. This is particularly important for those students who may be deemed vulnerable or at risk of adverse sexual experiences. As such there may need to be boundaries regarding the topics discussed, as well as careful communication with the school's Designated Safeguarding Lead, and pastoral and wellbeing staff. Within the classroom whole class ground rules or agreements may be a useful tool to manage expectations in the classroom (Barr et al., 2014). As alluded to by Mia, and further supported by literature (Elia, 2000), CYP's views should inform lesson planning. It may be helpful for educators to co-create the agreement with students to empower CYP's voices and foster group responsibility.

The lived experiences of participants are akin to wider research (Kehily, 2002), indicating that trust and safety should be at the heart of the classroom. Favourable educators were perceived as trustworthy, honest and approachable (see subtheme 3.1 and 4.2). Trustworthy educators were also viewed as those who kept information confidential. Frustrations around the sharing of information with parents and carers suggested to the researcher that CYP may lack an understanding of safeguarding in school. This finding is despite the reforms stating that *'children should be made aware of how to raise their concerns or make a report and how any report will be handled' (DfE, 2021b).* The findings from the current study may suggest further work is needed to improve communication between pupils and teachers regarding safeguarding concerns.

Conclusion: In summary, the RSE curriculum in secondary schools is delivered by mainstream teachers. Successful teachers are viewed by participants as confident, knowledgeable, trustworthy, and able to facilitate a safe and supportive classroom environment. Participants also appear to prefer educators of the same sex. The researcher's analytical interpretations may suggest a need for further training to support teachers to manage the complexities of classroom discussions and facilitate effective learning. The researcher would suggest that teachers may benefit from support from external services and senior leaders within their schools.

5.3.4 How do CYP want to be taught about RSE and sexual consent?

5.3.4.1 Current and preferential teaching pedagogy
When reflecting on their experiences of RSE and consent, participants discussed current and preferred teaching practices. Participants' accounts suggested that during RSE lessons, pupils are viewed by teachers as passive recipients of information (see subtheme 2.1). This is evidenced by an emphasis on copying information from the board and watching videos without opportunities for discussion. Videos were noted as a repeated teaching tool across subjects.

For many participants there appeared to be disgruntlement towards current pedagogy, despite CYP wanting to learn and having ideas as to how to improve teaching practices. A minority of participants' experiences suggested more inclusive and engaging learning opportunities (Sage & Mia). The researcher concluded that variation across experiences may

begin to be explained by a lack of guidance and lack of stipulated teaching materials within the reformed RSE documentation (DfE, 2019a).

5.3.4.2 Scenario based real world learning

Generally, participants' accounts indicated that the 'ideal' RSE lesson would offer CYP opportunities to participate in practical learning activities and contribute to class-based discussions. A preference for interactive lessons is not a novel finding and has been previously recognised within the literature (Hall, 2004; Strange et al., 2003). Participants voiced that activities should be relatable to real life, drawing on developmentally appropriate experiences (Sanjakdar & Yip, 2018).

The importance of realistic scenario-based learning was discussed by several participants when considering best practice for teaching sexual consent. Participants expressed preferences for learning about consent through discussion-based activities. A recognition that preferred learning draws on real world issues felt an important finding, given the perceived difficulties faced by participants when defining, discussing and navigating consent in real world contexts. The wider literature highlights that scenario-based learning allows educators a level of control and predictability to conversations (Kehily, 2002). The findings from this study suggested that scenarios should be accessible and relevant to the age and experience of CYP (Christen & Mikkelson, 2008; Sanjakdar & Yip, 2018).

In practice, the use of the sexual continuum devised by Whittington (2019), may be a helpful teaching tool to consider how educators could scaffold conversations around consent. The continuum was devised during a participatory action project which sought the views of CYP. As well as defining consent, the model also offers educators strategies for managing discussions and clarifying perceived ambiguities around sexual consent. In practice, the model may also be helpful when exploring pressures faced by CYP, such as consent within pre-existing relationships (see subtheme 5.3). The consent continuum is shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Continuum of consent developed by Whittington (2019) as part of a participatory action study.
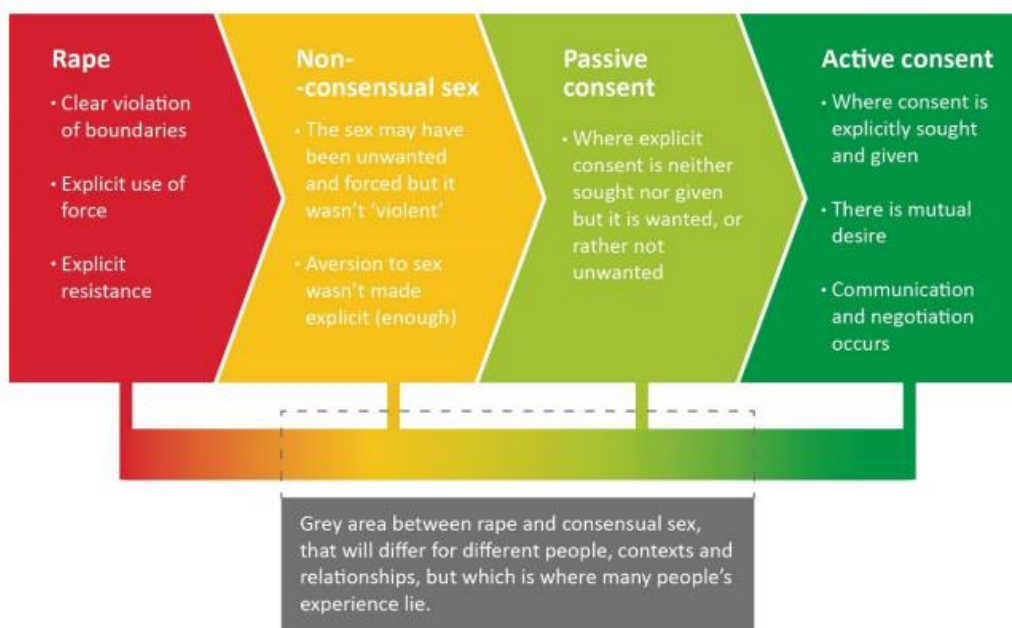
5.3.4.3 Effective use of videos

When teaching RSE, and specifically consent, participants explicitly acknowledged there was a heavily reliance on videos as teaching tools. Participants perceived videos both positively and negatively. Videos such as 'Tea and Consent' were viewed as satisfactory, while untitled videos covering other topics within the RSE curriculum, such as puberty and menstruation, were viewed by participants as dated and childish.

There was a suggestion that videos available on some social media sites may be more appropriate than current teaching tools. Videos on social media were understood to normalise narratives around sex education. Within the wider literature, the use of social media has been praised as a useful tool to teach adolescents healthy sexual knowledge (Cookingham & Ryan, 2015; Strasburger, 2012). Social media has also been recognised as helpful in proving pleasure-based sex education, challenging heteronormative constructions of sex, and offering an education on sexual consent (Sciberras & Tanner, 2023). While the use of social media could be a helpful tool for RSE lessons, implementation in practice would require careful monitoring by educators to ensure adolescents understand how to evaluate the quality of information available online (Fowler et al., 2022; Simon & Daneback, 2013).

Participants' experiences implied that videos are not effective standalone teaching tools and therefore, in the classroom, videos may be better used to support discussions. Participants' accounts suggested that conversations are a powerful teaching tool when discussing RSE (see subtheme 2.2) and when learning consent (see subtheme 5.1). These findings compliment the wider literature which recognises that CYP should be offered the space to think critically and reflectively about sexual consent (National Children's Bureau, 2014). In practice, it may be helpful for educators to consider how discussion-based learning can be facilitated in a safe environment.

5.3.4.4 Greater opportunities for discussions

The importance of conversations and discussions were linked to feelings of comfort. Participants' experiences suggested that for CYP to learn, pupils and teachers must overcome feelings of discomfort. The wider literature recognises the potential benefits of instilling open conversations to reduce feelings of discomfort and awkwardness (Walker, 2004). By addressing emotional discomfort, it is believed that CYP will be better engaged in lessons (Buston et al., 2002).

The researcher would suggest that findings from the current study imply that CYP are given few opportunities to safely discuss thoughts around sex and relationships. This finding is valuable, as previous researchers have questioned the extent to which CYP are able to discuss topics relating to RSE (Coy et al., 2013).

The findings have implications for practice, suggesting that topics perceived as 'awkward' should not be disregarded but instead addressed and discussed collaboratively with CYP. It may be helpful for teachers to create a space for discussions, which is facilitated and managed by strong skills on the part of the educator. In practice, educators may need support from the wider school systems and school senior leaders, to ensure the pedagogy facilitates a safe space for discussions without lessons becoming too emotionally demanding for CYP (Kehily, 2002).

5.3.4.5 Opportunities to feel safe in class

Educators may wish to consider ways to promote feelings of safety in the classroom. Fostering feelings of safety is important as it can increase class participation and engagement (Van Teijlingen et al., 2007). Participants' experiences suggested feelings of safety must be enabled prior to the delivery of RSE content. As such, participants voiced a

preference to be prewarned about lesson content (see subtheme 4.1) and given opportunities to seek alternative arrangements if required. In practice, it may be helpful for educators to be available to students outside timetabled RSE lessons, so pupils can seek support in confidence before lessons begin.

Additional alternative arrangements suggested by participants included access to fidget toys to manage feelings of worries and discomfort. There has been some literature to suggest that fidget toys can help students manage anxieties and attention difficulties as they redirect emotional and physical attention, allowing pupils to focus and attend to learning materials (Biel, 2017; Stalvey & Brasell, 2006). The researcher understood from discussions that such strategies may not align with whole school behaviour policies. The findings suggest that within schools there may need to be a consideration of how alternative arrangements are accessed by students and viewed by teachers. It may be helpful for pupils to be involved in discussions which ultimately may be decided by senior leaders.

A safe classroom environment may also be facilitated by allowing CYP the opportunities to ask anonymous questions; a suggestion made by several participants. Within the literature, anonymity enables pupils to ask questions without fear of embarrassment (Pariera & McCormack, 2017). Encouraging pupils to ask anonymous questions has also been shown to be a successful approach in addressing harmful misinformation (Pariera & McCormack, 2017). Providing students with the opportunity to ask questions in such a way may increase levels of comfort in the classroom and discourage pupils from seeking information from less reliable sources.

Within the classroom, feelings of safety were enhanced by same gender seating. The researcher understood that participants preferred to sit with same sex peers; this was particularly important for female students. Although not discussed by participants within this study, such preferences may be underpinned by risks of sexual harassment, objectification and teasing noted within the wider literature (Strange et al., 2003).

While CYP voiced a preference to sit with those of the same sex, participants voiced a preference for co-learning opportunities with those of the opposite sex. Within the RSE literature, co-learning and mixed-sex classes have proven beneficial in educating students

about the opposite sex (Lee et al., 2018; Strange et al., 2003). In practice, it may be helpful for educators to consider whole class seating to ensure pupils feel safe and able to learn.

Conclusion: In summary, findings suggest that current teaching practices for RSE and sexual consent rely heavily on the use of videos and perceived passive teaching approaches. The wider literature recognises that CYP may be at risk of disengagement, or instead seek information from unreliable sources. The researcher's analytical interpretations suggest there may need to be greater opportunities for classroom-based discussions and scenario-based teaching, which draw links to real world experiences. For conversations to be successful, it may be useful for educators to foster a safe classroom environment by considering preferences at an individual and whole class level.

5.4 Implications for EPs: How can the research be used by EPs?

The findings of the study not only have implications for school settings, policy makers and Government officials, but also EPs who work closely with school staff to ensure CYP have access to a comprehensive curriculum which supports social, emotional and behavioural development (Baker, 2015). Since EPs work as evidence-based practitioners (Cline et al., 2015), the researcher's analytical interpretations and research findings can offer a knowledge base to inform evidence-based practice. To compliment how EPs work, the researcher has considered implications at individual, group and organisational levels. (Cameron, 2006).

5.4.1 Working with individual young people

EPs may wish to use the findings when considering outcomes and provision for Year 9 pupils as part of their preparation for adulthood. The document '*Preparing for Adulthood*', developed by the DFE and the National Development Team for Inclusion, states pupils should have access to a comprehensive sex, drug and alcohol curriculum. When considering targets for these pupils, the findings can be used to identify facilitating factors within the school system which may support CYP to meet specific outcomes. To ensure outcomes are child-centred, EPs may wish to adopt person-centred tools to further elicit and advocate for the individual experiences and preferences of CYP regarding their RSE (Harding & Atkinson, 2009).

5.4.2 Working with parents, carers, and school staff

EPs may consider how the findings could be utilised during consultations. By having an awareness of the current picture of RSE, EPs may feel empowered and confident to facilitate discussions around the strengths and barriers of the current curriculum. During consultation, EPs may wish to explore the quality and quantity of RSE within the schools with which they work. EP's inter-personal skills (Nolan & Moreland, 2014) may help enable strength-based conversations.

During consultation, EPs may also wish to draw upon theories of adolescent development, offering hypotheses and an understanding of behaviours within this complex period of a CYP's life. EPs could use theoretical knowledge provided in Chapter Two to further explore risk taking behaviours.

EPs may wish to explore the impact of COVID-19 on the delivery of a comprehensive RSE curriculum. A consideration of missed learning is also particularly important for pupils 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' or those who find it difficult to access school (e.g., pupils identified as 'Emotionally Based School Avoidant'). The findings can be used to consider inequalities accessing education, as well as challenging systems to promote inclusion to education.

By working collaboratively with parents and school staff, EPs may help foster a shared understanding of the RSE curriculum. This is valuable given that the DfE guidance (2019b) states parents should be consulted in the creation of RSE policy. Offering parents and carers the opportunity to contribute to RSE policy may minimise negative parental attitudinal barriers, which have been recognised by participants within this study. Such collaborative work may help to increase an inclusive and an accepting, positive understanding of the importance of a comprehensive RSE.

5.4.3 Working systemically at a whole school level

By working at a systemic level, EPs may be able to contribute to organisational change and the development of organisational policy (Fox, 2009; Harding, 2017). The findings can be used to offer a shared understanding of how CYP currently view the RSE curriculum, and how they wish to receive RSE content. This may allow EPs to work in collaboration with school staff to embed the RSE curriculum as part of a whole school agenda. EPs may be able

to consider parallels between espoused vs actual practice, and support staff to develop a positive narrative around RSE.

EPs could also work collaboratively with school staff to develop tools, strategies and scripts used to facilitate effective communication with pupils. The findings of the study may be used to create up-to-date schemes of work that could be used alongside existing resources available through the PSHE Association. When working systemically, EPs should consider the school's motivation and readiness for change (Wang et al., 2020) and encourage staff to engage in monitoring through a process of assessing, planning, doing and reviewing.

To conclude, the current study has several implications for Educational Psychology practice, as well as for school staff and policymakers. It is important to recognise the limitations of the study (see section 5.2) and therefore the researcher would suggest the implications should be interpreted with a level of caution. The study has also highlighted several questions for future research which have been discussed in section 5.3 of this chapter and later summarised in Chapter Six.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

The research undertaken as part of the DAEP aimed to answer the following research questions: *What are CYP's experiences of the RSE curriculum, and, how do CYP experience the teaching of consent, as part of this curriculum?* The research was located within the framework of current Government legislation and policy pertaining to RSE delivery, with the purpose of understanding current pedagogy practices by providing CYP with a safe and reflective space to share their experiences. The researcher adopted an exploratory, qualitative approach in which she undertook three individual interviews and three small focus groups to gather the views of participants. The researcher positioned herself as a critical realist and undertook Reflexive TA (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to explore patterns of meaning across the datasets.

In response to research question one, the researcher developed four overarching themes: *A conflict of interest between espoused practice and policy and a curriculum important to CYP; Current teaching practices do not align with CYP's preferred methods; A perceived lack of trust, confidentiality, and lack of positive student-teacher relationships; The classroom environment does not enable feelings of safety and comfort.* The researcher also identified a detached theme, which was used to understand research question two: *Do CYP really understand consent?* This theme encapsulated a perceived lack of clarity about the meaning of the word consent beyond a simplistic 'yes'/'no' definition and potentially difficulties in the application of consent in real world contexts.

The researcher's analytical interpretations suggested that participants recognise there could be improvements to the RSE curriculum content, and also recognise wider considerations around when content is delivered, how it is delivered and who it is delivered by. The research illustrates the importance of situating RSE within theories of adolescent development and the need to provide opportunities for learning which relate to the age, maturity and experience of CYP. These elements are particularly important when teaching around consent. The research suggests that improvements to RSE are the responsibility of school staff, policy makers and Government officials, and that further work may be needed to ensure that that CYP are taught by confident, skilled, knowledgeable and trustworthy educators.

Analytical interpretations, conclusions and implications have been suggested at a school and national level. While interpretations and conclusions should be considered with caution due to the study's methodological limitations, when evaluating the quality of the study against qualitative criteria (Braun & Clarke, 2006;2021; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yardley, 2017), the study is believed to have achieved credibility, confirmability, rigor, transferability and transparency.

6.1 Original contributions

The study is thought to be one of the first in England to explore CYP's experiences of RSE since RSE became part of the statutory secondary curriculum in September 2020 (DfE, 2019a). Through exploratory aims and inductive reflexive interpretations, the study offers new insights into the lived experiences of CYP. The study also extends the existing evidence base for a comprehensive RSE curriculum, while advocating for the voice of CYP who are often underrepresented in education research (Renold et al., 2015).

The research offers a current account of the experiences of CYP, which is timely given the national focus on RSE. At the time of writing the discussion (March-May 2023), the RSE agenda was gathering political momentum and media attention because of concerns raised by anti-RSE lobbyists and parents and carers regarding concerns around curriculum content. In response, the DfE proposed a consultation review of the RSE curriculum and a potential review of the role of external speakers and teaching resources (BBC News, 2023). The organisation Brook outlined that the voice of CYP must be central to this review (Brook, 2023). While there are uncertainties around the practicalities of the consultation, the researcher would suggest this study provides invaluable findings, as the voice of CYP were central throughout.

The research findings can be considered alongside wider literature and legislation to consider implications for practice, policy and future research. Findings from the study provide suggestions and implications for a wealth of professionals within the fields of Psychology, Education and Health. The findings also offer a unique insight into how EPs can work with schools to promote the RSE curriculum in secondary schools. The research highlights the importance of professionals, systems and structures working collaboratively to support CYP during the period of adolescent development (Bronfenbrenner, 1997).

Overall, it is hoped the current study has positively contributed to a complex and under-researched topic, by empowering the voice of CYP and encouraging readers to think reflectively about how the findings can be used by professionals in practice.

6.2 Implications for future research

Throughout Chapter Five the researcher identified several suggestions for future research.

Further work may be needed to consider the long-term impact of the reformed RSE curriculum on the lived experiences of CYP. As interviews and focus groups took place in October and November 2022, it is appropriate to assume that participants had a limited experience of the new reforms, and therefore future researchers may wish to replicate the study to obtain a more detailed understanding of pupils' lived experiences post-reforms.

Further work may also be useful to consider the experiences of students from other ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. The findings from this study represent the experiences of White British students; a demographic representative of the LA in which the researcher collected her data. Future studies may wish to explore lived experiences across England, to ensure there is a holistic understanding of pupils' views.

Finally, researchers may wish to triangulate findings by obtaining the lived experiences of teaching staff, senior leaders and parents and carers. Researchers may wish to explore whether parents have been involved in the creation of school RSE policy, as recommended by DfE (2019b). Researchers may also wish to explore training opportunities and support for teachers around the delivery of RSE. Such a study may provide an understanding of the wider systems which contribute to the acquisition of adolescents' sexual knowledge.

6.3 Dissemination of findings

Following submission of the thesis, the researcher aims to disseminate the research findings to EPs within her Local Authority. The researcher plans to disseminate findings through an informal presentation and small group discussion to allow EPs time to reflect on implications for practice. The researcher will also be presenting her thesis at a TEP conference in Manchester on June 23rd 2023. If the DfE request evidence as part of their planned review of the RSE curriculum, the researcher would like to contribute towards this. The researcher also hopes to transform her thesis into an article for submission to a peer reviewed journal, within the next year. As discussed within the researcher's viva in May 2023, a letter has also

been sent to the two youth group settings, parents and guardians, summarising the research findings. The letter has been placed in Appendix 25.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Rational for Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria of the Systematic Literature Review (Chapter Two – Page 24)

Features of the study	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria	Rationale
Type of study	Qualitative or mixed methods	Quantitative	Qualitative data allowed for in-depth exploration of children and young people's perceptions of school based RSE
Type of publication	Studies published in peer review journals	Studies published outside of peer review journals	Peer review journals were chosen as the studies published within are reviewed by experts and should meet a high quality standard
Database	Indexed in ERIC, Web of Science, PsychInfo (OVID), Sociological Abstracts	Not indexed in ERIC, Web of Science, PsychInfo (OVID), Sociological Abstracts	The databases are relevant to psychology and education
Language of the study	Studies written in English	Studies written in languages other than English	Studies written in English allowed for the entire paper to be assessed
Publication date	Studies published between 2000 - 2022	Studies published prior to 2000	The date was chosen to allow links to be drawn to Government guidance, where appropriate
Geographical location	Studies conducted in England	Studies conducted outside of England	To allow for exploration of view within England and to allow links to
Age of participants	Children and young people aged 11-16 years	Studies where children were older or younger than 11-16 years of age	Students within secondary school were selected as they receive some level of school based RSE
Outcomes	Studies which focused on children and young people's perspectives of school based RSE

Studies which collected the voice of children and young people directly | Studies which focused only sexual activities, intimate relationships, teenage pregnancy, sexual health behaviours, sexual violence, consent, or HIV/AIDS

Studies which evaluated an intervention or programme

Studies which explored teacher, parent, peer, or school nurse perceptions

Studies which looked at retrospective views | The studies were selected to reflect the outcome, children and young people's perspectives of RSE |

Appendix 2. Rational for Excluded Studies at Full Screening Phase of the Systematic Literature Review (Chapter Two – Page 25)

Author, date and title	Reason(s) for exclusion
Abbott, K., Weckesser, A., & Egan, H. (2021). 'Everyone knows someone in an unhealthy relationship': young people's talk about intimate heterosexual relationships in England. *Sex Education*, *21*(3), 304-318.	The study focused explicitly on intimate relationships
Aggleton, P., & Campbell, C. (2000). Working with young people-towards an agenda for sexual health. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, *15*(3), 283-296	It was not a primary study
Aranda, K., Coleman, L., Sherriff, N. S., Cocking, C., Zeeman, L., & Cunningham, L. (2018). Listening for commissioning: A participatory study exploring young people's experiences, views and preferences of school-based sexual health and school nursing. *Journal of clinical nursing*, *27*(1-2), 375-385.	The study focused explicitly on sexual health and school nurses
Attwood, F., & Smith, C. (2011). Investigating young people's sexual cultures: an introduction. Sex Education, 11(3), 235-242	The study focused on LGB+ CYP experience of English, not the RSE curriculum
Brady, G., Lowe, P., Brown, G., Osmond, J., & Newman, M. (2018). 'All in all it is just a judgement call': issues surrounding sexual consent in young people's heterosexual encounters. Journal of Youth Studies, 21(1), 35-50.	The study focused explicitly on consent and participants were too old
Bragg, S., Ponsford, R., Meiksin, R., Emmerson, L., & Bonell, C. (2021). Dilemmas of school-based relationships and sexuality education for and about consent. *Sex Education*, *21*(3), 269-283.	The study focused explicitly on consent in RSE
Coleman, L. (2008). Preferences towards sex education and information from a religiously diverse sample of young people. *Health Education*.	Study did not generate qualitative data
Coleman, L., & Testa, A. (2007). Preferences towards sex education and information from an ethnically diverse sample of young people. *Sex education*, *7*(3), 293-307.	Study did not generate qualitative data
Corteen, K. M. (2006). Schools' fulfilment of sex and relationship education documentation: three school-based case studies. *Sex Education*, *6*(1), 77-99.	Study did not generate qualitative data from children and young people
Donovan, C., & Hester, M. (2008). 'Because she was my first girlfriend, I didn't know any different': making the case for mainstreaming same-sex sex/relationship education. *Sex education*, *8*(3), 277-287.	The study focused explicitly on love and violence not RSE
Finlay, W. M. L., Rohleder, P., Taylor, N., & Culfear, H. (2015). 'Understanding' as a practical issue in sexual health education for people with intellectual disabilities: A study using two qualitative methods. *Health Psychology*, *34*(4), 328.	The study did not collect the voice of CYP
Formby, E. (2011). Sex and relationships education, sexual health, and lesbian, gay and bisexual sexual cultures: Views from young people. *Sex education*, *11*(3), 255-266.	Participants were too old and used retrospective views (13-35 years)
Formby, E., & Donovan, C. (2020). Sex and relationships education for LGBT+ young people: Lessons from UK youth work. *Sexualities*, *23*(7), 1155-1178.	Participants were too old and used retrospective views (16-25 years)
Forrest, S. (2000). 'Big and tough': Boys learning about sexuality and manhood. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, *15*(3), 247-261.	It was not a primary study
Hannah, L. A., & Stagg, S. D. (2016). Experiences of sex education and sexual awareness in young adults with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, *46*(12), 3678-3687.	Participants were too old (18-25 years)
Hilton, G. L. (2001). Sex Education-the issues when working with boys. *Sex Education: Sexuality, Society and Learning*, *1*(1), 31-41.	It was not a primary study
Hilton, G. L. (2003). Listening to the boys: English boys' views on the desirable characteristics of teachers of sex education. *Sex Education: Sexuality, Society and Learning*, *3*(1), 33-45.	Participants were too old (16-17 years)

Hilton, G. L. (2007). Listening to the boys again: An exploration of what boys want to learn in sex education classes and how they want to be taught. Sex Education, 7(2), 161-174.	Participants were too old (16-17 years)
Hirst, J. (2008). Developing sexual competence? Exploring strategies for the provision of effective sexualities and relationships education. *Sex education*, *8*(4), 399-413.	The study used the same data as a more in-depth paper included in the review
Hirst, J. (2013). 'It's got to be about enjoying yourself': young people, sexual pleasure, and sex and relationships education. *Sex Education*, *13*(4), 423-436.	Th study used the same data as a more in-depth paper included in the review
Ingham, R. (2005). 'We didn't cover that at school': Education against pleasure or education for pleasure?. *Sex education*, *5*(4), 375-388.	It was not a primary study
Jørgensen, C. R., Weckesser, A., Turner, J., & Wade, A. (2019). Young people's views on sexting education and support needs: Findings and recommendations from a UK-based study. *Sex education*, *19*(1), 25-40.	The study focused explicitly on sexting, and only one mentioned sexting education
Limmer, M. (2010). Young men, masculinities and sex education. Sex education, 10(4), 349-358.	Participants were too old (15-18 years)
Maxwell, C. (2006). Context and "contextualisation" in sex and relationships education. *Health Education, 106*(6), 437-449.	Participants were too old and used retrospective views (16-23 years)
Newby, K., Wallace, L. M., Dunn, O., & Brown, K. E. (2012). A survey of English teenagers' sexual experience and preferences for school-based sex education. *Sex Education*, *12*(2), 231-251.	Study did not generate qualitative data
Sauntson, H. (2016). Authenticating sexual diversity in school: Examining sociolinguistic constructions of young people's sexual identities. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, *15*(1), 17-31.	Participants were too old and used retrospective views (16-22 years)
Scott, R. H., Smith, C., Formby, E., Hadley, A., Hallgarten, L., Hoyle, A., ... & Tourountsis, D. (2020). What and how: doing good research with young people, digital intimacies, and relationships and sex education. *Sex Education*, *20*(6), 675-691.	Study did not generate qualitative data
Setty, E. (2021). Sex and consent in contemporary youth sexual culture: the 'ideals' and the 'realities'. *Sex Education*, *21*(3), 331-346	The study focused explicitly on consent
Spencer, G., Maxwell, C., & Aggleton, P. (2008). What does 'empowerment' mean in school-based sex and relationships education?. *Sex Education*, *8*(3), 345-356.	It was not a primary study
Thomas, N., Murray, E., & Rogstad, K. E. (2006). Confidentiality is essential if young people are to access sexual health services. *International journal of STD & AIDS*, *17*(8), 525-529.	The study focused explicitly on sexual health
Turnbull, T., Van Schaik, P., & Van Wersch, A. (2010). Adolescents' preferences regarding sex education and relationship education. *Health Education Journal*, *69*(3), 277-286.	The study evaluated a sex education programme
Wallace, L. M., Evers, K. E., Wareing, H., Dunn, O. M., Newby, K., Paiva, A., & Johnson, J. L. (2007). Informing school sex education using the stages of change construct: sexual behaviour and attitudes towards sexual activity and condom use of children aged 13–16 in England. Journal of health psychology, 12(1), 179-183	Study did not generate qualitative data
Westwood, J., & Mullan, B. (2006). Knowledge of secondary school pupils regarding sexual health education. *Sex Education*, *6*(02), 151-162	Study did not generate qualitative data and the study focused explicitly on sexual health
Whittington, E. (2019). Co-producing and navigating consent in participatory research with young people. Journal of Children's Services.	The study focused explicitly on consent
Whittington, E. (2021). Rethinking consent with continuums: sex, ethics and young people. Sex Education, 21(4), 480-496	The study focused explicitly on consent and participants were too old (13-25 years)
Wight, D., & Abraham, C. (2000). From psycho-social theory to sustainable classroom practice: developing a research-based teacher-delivered sex education programme. *Health education research*, *15*(1), 25-38	The study evaluated a sex education programme

Appendix 3. Rational for CASP Scoring of Studies Included in the Systematic Literature Review (Chapter Two – Page 26)

CASP Checklist	Strange et al (2003)	Forrest et al (2004)	Hirst (2004)	Sundaram & Sauntson (2016)
Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	+ yes explicit	- no clear statement of aims, instead general improving evidence base	- no clear statement, instead enhancing understanding	+ yes explicit
Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	+ yes seeks participants experiences	+ yes seeks participants experiences	+ yes seeks participants experiences	+ yes seeks participants experiences
Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	? no justification of methods	+ yes needs assessment seems appropriate to explore discrepancies and gaps	+ yes needs assessment seems appropriate and justified research strategies with reference	+ yes needs assessment seems appropriate and justified
Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	- no explanation as to how the participants for the focus groups were selected, one brief sentence on wider recruitment to study	- no detail of number of young people who gave their thoughts, facilitated by Year 12 students question suitability, one sentence on wider recruitment to study	+ detailed description, purposive sample, range of ages, experience and genders – volunteered	+ detailed description, snowball sample based on cognition and emotional capability
Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	+ data collection justified, explicit how collected, form of the data e.g. transcripts, not said how long it would be kept for	? no justification of method, was clear how collected, not said how long it would be kept for	+ research method justified, clear explanation as to how conducted but didn't mentioned how long they would keep the data	+ research method justified, clear explanation as to how conducted
Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	- no discussion of own role or bias, were involved in data collection	- no discussion of own role	- no discussion of own role	- no discussion of own role, potential feminist stance
Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	+ yes confidentiality and anonymity but no consent mentioned or ethics approval	- no mention of ethics, consent, confidentiality, approval	- no mention of ethics, consent, confidentiality, approval	+ yes information sheet, consent and purpose explained
Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	? detailed description of process but no clear analysis method, sufficient evidence in the form of quotes to support findings, did analysis separate then collated ideas	? detailed description of process but no clear analysis method, have integrated a few original quotes of questions in the results	- no description of how data was analysed	? data analysed through narrative but not explicitly explained
Is there a clear statement of findings?	+ findings very detailed, are related to original research questions but no clear single summary statement	+ findings are explicit and discussed in relation to broad research question but no clear summary statement	+ findings very detailed, are related to original research questions	+ findings very detailed, are related to original research questions with short summary paragraph
How valuable is the research?	+ links to contributions from other research, has mentioned implications of research and suggested research	+ exploratory in nature, links to other research, mentioned implications of research and future suggestions	+ exploratory in nature, explores a range of experiences and links to political contexts	+ some links to other research, very relevant to current research question

Appendix 4. Thematic Synthesis of Descriptive and Analytical Themes Generated During the Systematic Literature Review (Chapter Two – Page 28)

Stage 1 – Line by Line Coding	Stage 2 – Descriptive Themes	Stage 3 – Analytical Themes
Sexists and defamatory names	Derogatory language	Pressures on CYP
Judgement of clothing and appearance		
Accusations damage reputations		
Misuse of words		
Support to deal with name calling		
Interest vs. sexual status	Confidence to participate in lessons	
Girls tailor behaviour to avoid being labelled		
Girls disinclined to engage		
Ridicule		
Maturity levels of older/ability sets		
Pressured to act on sexual advances	Sexual harassment and objectification	
Harassment		
Girls' responsibility to protect themselves		
Greater levels of support needed		
Objectification		
Single sex classes reduce harassment		
Genders discourse around pleasure	Role of women in providing pleasure	
Pressure to engage in sexual talk		
Pleasure – boys confident and girls' judgement		
Unconscious bias teachers		
Girls 'perform' 'doing'		
Pleasure absent from curriculum		
Favourable male focus		
Content irrelevant, repetitive	Unsatisfactory content	Teaching Pedagogies
Support too late		
Does not teach language		
Content differs across class/school		
Disconnect between experiences and constructions		
Need for earlier SRE		
Content heteronormative		
Content gendered		
Binary perception of sex		
Missing topics		
Marginalised minority voices		
Prefer interactive - discussions		
Single sex vs. mixed sex classes		
Constructed – scary, risky and dangerous	Discourse that sex is risky	
Told not to have sex		
Negative implications of sex		
Videos unsuitable		
Boys disruptive	Classroom management and favourable traits	
Time spent on discipline		
Boys deal with anxiety and fear		
Boys find it difficult to ask questions in front of girls		
Male teachers manage discipline		
Personal characteristics are more important than sex		
Authoritarian style – fair		
Empower CYP voices		
Respect confidentiality		
Trustworthy		
Teachers credible source of information		

Interview one — 03/11/22/

I was a little nervous about the interview tonight as I felt the focus group the previous week worked well given the group composition, however I reminded myself that Fellb was given autonomy + chose this approach. During the interview Fellb shared some quite personal stories about his gender, which I found difficult not over curious as I was mindful I am a new/outsider to him. There was a moment he felt unsupported previously however it was reassuring to hear he was now getting support in school. His experiences of RSE highlighted quite a boy/girl curriculum, in the sense boys and girls learn different things, which I felt was similar to my experience of RSE at school. Fellb was offered views about society, which seemed to be informed by his friends views; friends felt a protective factor for Fellb offering non-judgmental support + knowledge + caring around RSE. For him friends didn't seem as protective, which is different to those from focus group who talked a lot about friends as resources + support.

Focus group two — 16/11/22/

The focus group tonight felt successful, CYP were able to share ideas with one another and lead on conversations with little input from me. There were a few dominant voices, mainly Wendy and Sandra and I wondered if this was because they felt, or I think they felt, quite frustrated with the RSE they have received. Themes captured a lack of opportunities to discuss sex positive topics + topics important to CYP, likewise, topics taught was also felt too late as several participants shared they were sexually active before content had been taught. Generally participants left me feeling quite disappointed that CYP felt let down by the current system, and the voices of CYP suggested to the researcher that there needs to be more supporting access + support available in school.

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Appendix 6. Introductory Email Sent to Potential Youth Groups (Chapter Three – page 58)

Good morning/afternoon,

I hope you are well. My name is Sophie Cave, I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at East Riding County Council. As part of my Doctorate in Educational Psychology, I am hoping to undertake some research which explores young people's experiences of the Relationship and Sex Education curriculum.

The research would involve focus groups or interviews with young people, who volunteer to take part. The research will advocate for young people to share their experiences of how consent is taught in secondary schools across East Riding. The research is important as very little is known about how young people learn about consent.

The research has been developed in conjunction with key stakeholders from the East Riding of Yorkshire's Educational Psychology Service and with the University of Nottingham.

If you are interested in more information, please could you send me an email and I will send you some more details.

Kind regards
Sophie Cave

Y2 Trainee Educational Psychologist
University of Nottingham

School of Psychology - Letter to Youth Group

University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

A qualitative exploration of young people's experiences of how consent is taught as part of the Relationship and Sex Education curriculum.

Ethics Approval Number:
Researcher: Sophie Cave - sophie.cave@nottingham.ac.uk
Supervisor: Russell Hounslow - russell.hounslow@nottingham.ac.uk

Dear X,

My name is Sophie Cave. I am a doctoral student at the University of Nottingham. I am kindly requesting your support in facilitating my Doctoral Educational Psychology research study.

The study aims to explore young people's (age 11-16) experiences of the Relationship and Sex Education curriculum, specifically how consent is taught in schools. Before you decide if you wish to support this research, please take time to read the following information carefully.

The Research
As a Trainee Educational Psychologist studying at the University of Nottingham, I am hoping to undertake a piece of research which will contribute to our understanding of how young people are taught about Relationship and Sex Education and sexual consent in school.

What is involved?
If you are interested in supporting this study, we will work together to facilitate communication to potential parents/carers and young people who attend your youth group. I also hope to volunteer at your youth group to build rapport with potential participants. During this time, I may deliver a short 5-minute presentation which explains my study in an accessible way.

As part of the project, the young people will either take part in an individual interview, or in a focus group with 4 or 5 other young people. The young people will be able to choose which they prefer. I will ask a series of questions about their experiences of Relationship and Sex Education and being taught about sexual consent at school.

Young people are not obliged to take part in the study, even if they attend your youth group. Consent will be sought from parents/carers and young people. I hope that the focus groups and interviews will take around 1 hour, in a comfortable and private space within the youth group setting.

I will audio record the focus groups and interviews, so I can type up the discussions after. The recording will be stored securely and once transcribed, will be deleted. Any information which may be identifiable will be anonymised. Data will be stored in line with the University's Privacy Agreement.

I will work with you as a youth group to identify a designated safeguarding lead. I will also follow safeguarding policies and procedures outlined by the East Riding of Yorkshire's Local Authority. This may mean sharing information with the Local Authority, if a young person is deemed at risk of harm.

To support the young people, I hope there would be the opportunity for a member of staff to provide an emotional check-in after the focus group or interview. Throughout the process I will offer my full support and be free to contact.

If you are interested in supporting this research, please get in touch, so we can discuss arrangements further.

Email: sophie.cave@nottingham.ac.uk   Phone: 07790 343174

Many thanks for taking the time to read this information.

Kind Regards,

Sophie Cave
Y2 Trainee Educational Psychologist
University of Nottingham

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:
Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)
stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

School of Psychology - Parent/Carer Information Sheet

University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

A qualitative exploration of young people's experiences of how consent is taught as part of the Relationship and Sex Education curriculum.

Ethics Approval Number:
Researcher: Sophie Cave - sophie.cave@nottingham.ac.uk
Supervisor: Russell Hounslow - russell.hounslow@nottingham.ac.uk

This is an invitation for you to give consent for your child to take part in a research study. The research hopes to find out more about young people's experiences of the Relationship and Sex Education curriculum, specifically how consent is taught in schools.

Who is undertaking the research?
My name is Sophie Cave and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist studying at the University of Nottingham for a Doctorate in Educational Psychology.

What is involved?
The research aims to find out about young people's thoughts and experiences of the Relationships and Sex Education curriculum, and specifically how they have been taught about consent (if at all).

Young people who take part will be invited to join a small discussion group with other young people or, if they prefer, an individual interview with the researcher to share their views.

Discussion groups or interviews will last no longer than an hour. Discussions will be audio-recorded but will remain entirely anonymous. After the focus group or interview, the recording will be transcribed and then destroyed. It will not be possible to identify any young person as part of this study.

Does my child have to take part?
No. Taking part in this study is entirely voluntary. Even if you agree that your child can take part, they will also be asked to give consent and can refuse. If you have any concerns about your child taking part in the study (for example the risk or emotional distress or past experiences), then you should not give consent.

What if I change my mind?
Even if you and your child agree that they can take part now, you or your child can change your mind later and can withdraw up until the data is transcribed and anonymised. If you or your child decide to take part and later wish to withdraw, please email me, on the above details. You do not need to give a reason why.

Want to find out more?
Your child will also receive an information sheet, like this one. If you are happy for them to take part, please email me and I will send you both a consent form to sign. Once the form is completed please can you return this to XXXX (tbc).

Any questions?
You can email me if you have any concerns or questions. I am also hoping to volunteer at the youth group, so questions may also be answered in person.

Many thanks for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Sophie Cave

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:
Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)
stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

School of Psychology - Privacy Statement

University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

Privacy information for Research Participants
For information about the University's obligations with respect to your data, who you can get in touch with and your rights as a data subject, please visit: www.nottingham.ac.uk/utilities/privacy/privacy.aspx.

Why we collect your personal data?
We collect personal data under the terms of the University's Royal Charter in our capacity as a teaching and research body to advance education and learning. Specific purposes for data collection on this occasion is to: fulfil the research requirements of the Doctorate in Educational Psychology course; empower the voice of children and young people; and add to the research in understanding children and young people's experiences of the Relationship and Sex Education Curriculum.

Legal basis for processing your personal data under GDPR
The legal basis for processing your personal data on this occasion is to obtain consent, in line with Article 6(1e), processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest.

Special category personal data
In addition to the legal basis for processing your personal data, the University must meet a further basis when processing any special category data, including: personal data revealing racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, or trade union membership, and the processing of genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a natural person, data concerning health or data concerning a natural person's sex life or sexual orientation. The basis for processing your sensitive personal data on this occasion is Article 9(2a) the data subject has given explicit consent to the processing.

How long do we keep your data?
The University may store your data for up to 25 years and for a period of no less than 7 years after the research project finishes. The researchers who gathered or processed the data may also store the data indefinitely and reuse it in future research. Audio recordings of group or interview discussions will be destroyed immediately once transcribed. All transcription data will be stored on a password protected encrypted device and will be entirely anonymised and following a pseudonymisation procedure.

Who do we share your data with?
Extracts of your data may be disclosed in published works that are posted online for use by the scientific community. Your data may also be stored indefinitely on external data repositories (e.g., the UK Data Archive) and be further processed for archiving purposes in the public interest, or for historical, scientific or statistical purposes. It may also move with the researcher who collected your data to another institution in the future.

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:
Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)
stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED!

A qualitative exploration of young people's experiences of how consent is taught as part of the Relationship and Sex Education curriculum.

Why this study?

The aim of this research is to explore young people's experiences of the Relationship and Sex Education curriculum, specifically how sexual consent is taught in schools. The research is important as very little is known about this topic.

How can I find out more?

If you would like to take part in the study, please email me and I will send you and your parent or carer an information sheet, so you can find out more about the study.

Researcher:

Sophie Cave

sophie.cave@nottingham.ac.uk

What will the study involve?

You will be invited to join a small discussion group with other young people or, if you prefer, an individual interview with the researcher to share your views. I will ask a series of questions about your experiences of Relationship and Sex Education and being taught about sexual consent at school.

Discussion groups or interviews will last no longer than an hour and will take place in a comfortable and private space within the youth group setting.

You must:

- Be in Key Stage 3 or 4 (Year 7-11)
- Have been taught about sexual consent in school through Relationship & Sex Education
- Attend a youth group
- Have parental/carer consent when under the age of 16

Ethics Approval Number:
Supervisor: Russell Hounslow
russell.hounslow@nottingham.ac.uk

School of Psychology - Young Person Information Sheet

University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

A qualitative exploration of young people's experiences of how consent is taught as part of the Relationship and Sex Education curriculum.

Ethics Approval Number:
Researcher: Sophie Cave - sophie.cave@nottingham.ac.uk
Supervisor: Russell Hounslow - russell.hounslow@nottingham.ac.uk

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:
Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)
stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

Giving you a voice
This is an invitation to take part in a research study. The research hopes to find out about your experience of the Relationship and Sex Education curriculum, specifically how consent is taught in schools.

Who is undertaking the research?
My name is Sophie Cave and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist studying at the University of Nottingham.

What is involved?
The research aims to find out about your experience of the Relationships and Sex Education curriculum, and specifically how you experience of how consent it taught.

You will be invited to join a small discussion group with other young people or, if you prefer, an individual interview with the researcher to share your views.

Discussion groups or interviews will last no longer than an hour. Discussions will be audio-recorded but will remain entirely anonymous. After the focus group or interview, the recording will be transcribed and then destroyed. It will not be possible to identify any young person as part of this study.

Is this study for me?
Before deciding whether to take part, it is important to think your own experiences. We will be talking about consent, in the context of what you have learnt in school. It is important you only share information, personal experiences and memories you are comfortable sharing. At the start of the focus group we will co-construct some ground rules to keep everyone safe.

Do I have to take part?
No. Taking part in this study is entirely voluntary. To take part you will also need your parent or carers consent.

What if I change my mind?
Even if you decide to take part now, you can change your mind later and can withdraw up until the data is transcribed and anonymised. If you decide to take part and later wish to withdraw, please email me, on the above details. You do not need to give a reason why.

Want to find out more?
Your parent or carer will also receive an information sheet, just like this one. If they are happy for you to take part in the study, they can contact me, and I will send you a form to sign.

Any questions?
You can email me if you have any concerns or questions. I am also hoping to volunteer at the youth group, so questions may also be answered in person.

Many thanks for taking the time to read this information sheet.
Sophie Cave

School of Psychology - Young People Demographics

University of **Nottingham**
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

A qualitative exploration of young people's experiences of how consent is taught as part of the Relationship and Sex Education curriculum.

Ethics Approval Number:
Researcher: Sophie Cave - sophie.cave@nottingham.ac.uk
Supervisor: Russell Hounslow - russell.hounslow@nottingham.ac.uk

First Name		Last Name		Pseudonym	

Date of Birth *dd/mm/yy*	

Preferred Pronoun *(please describe the pronouns you use)*		Prefer Not to Say *(tick here)*	

Gender Identity *(please describe your gender identity)*		Prefer Not to Say *(tick here)*	

Sexual Orientation *(please describe your sexual orientation)*		Prefer Not to Say *(tick here)*	

Ethnicity *(please tick one)*

White		Prefer Not to Say	
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British		Other (Please Specify Below)	
Mixed/Multiple Ethnic Group			
Asian/Asian British			

School Setting *(please tick one)*

Mainstream	
Private	
Specialist	
Alternative	
Other (Please Specify Below)	

School Composition *(please tick one)*

Mixed Sex	
Single Sex	

Would you identify yourself as having a Special Educational Need or Disability? *(please tick one)*

Yes		If (Yes) and you feel comfortable to, please provide details below
No		
Prefer Not to Say		

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:
Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)
stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

Rapport building:

- o Can you tell me one thing you enjoy doing when you come to the youth group?

Main questions:

1. Can you tell me about your experiences of the relationship and sex education curriculum in school to date?

Topics:

- o What topics have you covered?
- o How would you describe the quality of the lessons?
- o Are there any topics you feel have been missed or you would like to have known more about?
- o Are there any topics that you wish you had been taught about sooner?
- o How relevant do the topics feel to real life?
- o How sensitive are the topics to different cultures, sexualities and genders?
- o Do you feel you have received enough support and signposting to services?

Teaching styles/approaches:

- o How have you been taught? Videos, resources?
- o Who has taught you? Have there been any guest speakers?
- o How often are the lessons? Do you feel this is enough or would you like more?

Teacher characteristics:

- o Can you tell me what makes a good teacher for these lessons?
- o Are there any characteristics which you think makes a less favourable teacher?
- o How would you describe the teachers skills to teach the lessons?

Classroom expectations:

- o Were there any expectations or boundaries set before the lessons, similar to those we discussed today?
- o How confident do you feel to participate in the lessons?
- o Do you feel able to share your thoughts and feeling in the lessons?

Class dynamics:

- o Are you taught in single or mixed sex classes? Which would you prefer if you had the choice?
- o Can you tell me a little about what students' behaviours are like in the classroom?
- o How would you describe the classroom environment?
- o How able are the teachers in managing classroom behaviours?
- o How would you describe the language used by others in class when discussing topics around sex and relationships?

2. What do you think I mean by the term, "sexual consent"?
    - o Do you think you could define the term consent for me?
    - o Have your teachers taught you what sexual consent means? What kind of language have they used in school?
    - o How would you describe consent to me, do you think it has been discussed in a positive or negative way in school?

- From the skills you have been taught in school, do you feel in being able to discuss consent with others, such as a partner or with your peers?

3. In school, can you recall any lessons or activities which have focused on sexual consent or healthy relationships?
   - What were they like?
   - How were you taught? – see above themes (teaching style, teacher characteristics, classroom expectations and class dynamics)
   - Were you encouraged to share your voice and thoughts in these lessons?

4. What was the best way you feel that you have learnt about sexual consent?
   - Can you tell me a little about what made this a helpful learning process?
   - Is there anything you wish teachers knew when you were learning about this subject, which would have made the learning experience better?

5. How do you feel about the quantity and quality of the sex education you have received?
   - When were you first taught about sexual consent?
   - Do you feel like you were taught about this subject early enough? If not, what age do you think people should start learning about consent?
   - Can you remember if you have been taught anything about the law? For example, what the legal age of consent is or what the equality act does?
   - Do you feel like the lessons have been inclusive?

6. Is there anything else you would like to learn about in relation to sexual consent?
   - Do you feel you have received enough support and guidance?
   - Would you know who to go to if you wanted support in school?
   - How confident would you feel accessing this support?

School of Psychology - Young Person Debrief Sheet

University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

A qualitative exploration of young people's experiences of how consent is taught as part of the Relationship and Sex Education curriculum.

Ethics Approval Number:
Researcher: Sophie Cave - sophie.cave@nottingham.ac.uk
Supervisor: Russell Hounslow - russell.hounslow@nottingham.ac.uk

The aim of this research was to explore young people's experiences of the Relationship and Sex Education curriculum, specifically how consent is taught in schools. The research is invaluable as there is not a lot known about this topic.

Your rights
It is important to remind you that you can withdraw your data if you no longer wish to be part of the study. To do this please use the email the researcher.

Support and advice
It is hoped that the study has not caused any distress, however if you have any worries about what we discussed, you should seek advice and support from a charity or organisation. The following information might be useful:

Childline
Website: https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/friends-relationships-sex/sex-relationships/
Contact: https://www.childline.org.uk/get-support/

Brook
Website: https://www.brook.org.uk/topics/sex/
Contact: https://www.brook.org.uk/find-a-service/

Disrespect NoBody
Website: https://www.disrespectnobody.co.uk/
Contact: https://www.disrespectnobody.co.uk/need-help/

Rape Crisis
Website: https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-informed/about-sexual-violence/sexual-consent/
Contact: https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-help/want-to-talk/

You will also be able to seek support and guidance from youth group staff (contact details to be added once a youth group has been identified). If you have any remaining questions, please contact me via email. If you have any concerns about the study which you would rather not discuss with me, please contact my supervisor, Russell Hounslow.

I would just like to say a big thank you for taking part in the project!

Sophie Cave

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:
Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)
stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

School of Psychology - Parent/Carer Consent Form

A qualitative exploration of young people's experiences of how consent is taught as part of the Relationship and Sex Education curriculum.

Ethics Approval Number:
Researcher: Sophie Cave - sophie.cave@nottingham.ac.uk
Supervisor: Russell Hounslow - russell.hounslow@nottingham.ac.uk

The parent/carer should answer these questions independently:

Have you read and understood the Information Sheet? Yes ☐ No ☐

Have you had the opportunity to ask questions about the study? Yes ☐ No ☐

Have all your questions been answered satisfactorily (if applicable)? Yes ☐ No ☐

Do you understand that you can withdraw your child from Yes ☐ No ☐
the study at any time and without giving a reason?

I give permission for my child's data (from this study) to be shared with Yes ☐ No ☐
other researchers provided that my anonymity is completely protected.

Do you agree to your child taking part in the study? Yes ☐ No ☐

"This study has been explained to me to my satisfaction, and I agree for my child to take part. I understand that I am free to withdraw my child at any time."

Name (in block capitals):

Signature of the parent/carer: Date:

I have explained the study to the above parent/carer, and he/she has agreed to take part.

Name (in block capitals):

Signature of researcher: Date:

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:
Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)
stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

School of Psychology - Young Person Consent Form

University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

A qualitative exploration of young people's experiences of how consent is taught as part of the Relationship and Sex Education curriculum.

Ethics Approval Number:
Researcher: Sophie Cave - sophie.cave@nottingham.ac.uk
Supervisor: Russell Hounslow - russell.hounslow@nottingham.ac.uk

The young person should answer these questions independently:

Have you read and understood the Information Sheet? Yes ☐ No ☐

Have you had the opportunity to ask questions about the study? Yes ☐ No ☐

Have all your questions been answered satisfactorily (if applicable)? Yes ☐ No ☐

Do you understand that you can withdraw from the study Yes ☐ No ☐
at any time and without giving a reason?

I give permission for my data (from this study) to be shared with other Yes ☐ No ☐
researchers provided that my anonymity is completely protected.

Do you agree to taking part in the study? Yes ☐ No ☐

"This study has been explained to me to my satisfaction, and I agree to take part. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time."

Name (in block capitals):

Signature of the young person: Date:

I have explained the study to the above young person, and he/she has agreed to take part.

Name (in block capitals):

Signature of researcher: Date:

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:
Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)
stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

The University of Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

SJ/tp

Ref: **S1425**

Thursday 5th May 2022

Dear Sophie Cave and Russell Hounslow,

Ethics Committee Review

Thank you for submitting an account of your proposed research 'A qualitative exploration of

young people's experiences of how consent is taught as part of the Relationship and Sex

Education Curriculum

That proposal has now been reviewed and we are pleased to tell you it has met with the Committee's approval.

However:
Please note the following comments from our reviewers;

Reviewer One:

I'm happy to approve this with minor revisions without further submission. My comments are:
Information sheet
- Participants can withdraw from the study anytime.
Reviewer Two:
In the recruitment poster, participants' age is 7-11, but elsewhere it is 11-16. Please rectify

Final responsibility for ethical conduct of your research rests with you or your supervisor. The Codes of Practice setting out these responsibilities have been published by the British Psychological Society and the University Research Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns whatever during the conduct of your research then you should consult those Codes of Practice. The Committee should be informed immediately should any participant complaints or adverse events arise during the study.

Independently of the Ethics Committee procedures, supervisors also have responsibilities for the risk assessment of projects as detailed in the safety pages of the University web site. Ethics Committee approval does not alter, replace, or remove those responsibilities, nor does it certify that they have been met.

Appendix 17. An Example of a Group Confidentiality Agreement Produced by Participants of Focus Group One (Chapter Three – page 65)

GROUP AGREEMENT

- DONT TALK OVER OTHER PEOPLE
- ANYTHING WE SAY STAYS IN HERE
- NO QUESTION, IS A SILLY QUESTION
- NO COMMENT IS A SILLY COMMENT
- LISTEN TO EACHOTHER
- CARE FOR PEOPLE AROUND YOU
- ONLY SHARE WHAT YOU WANT TO SHARE.
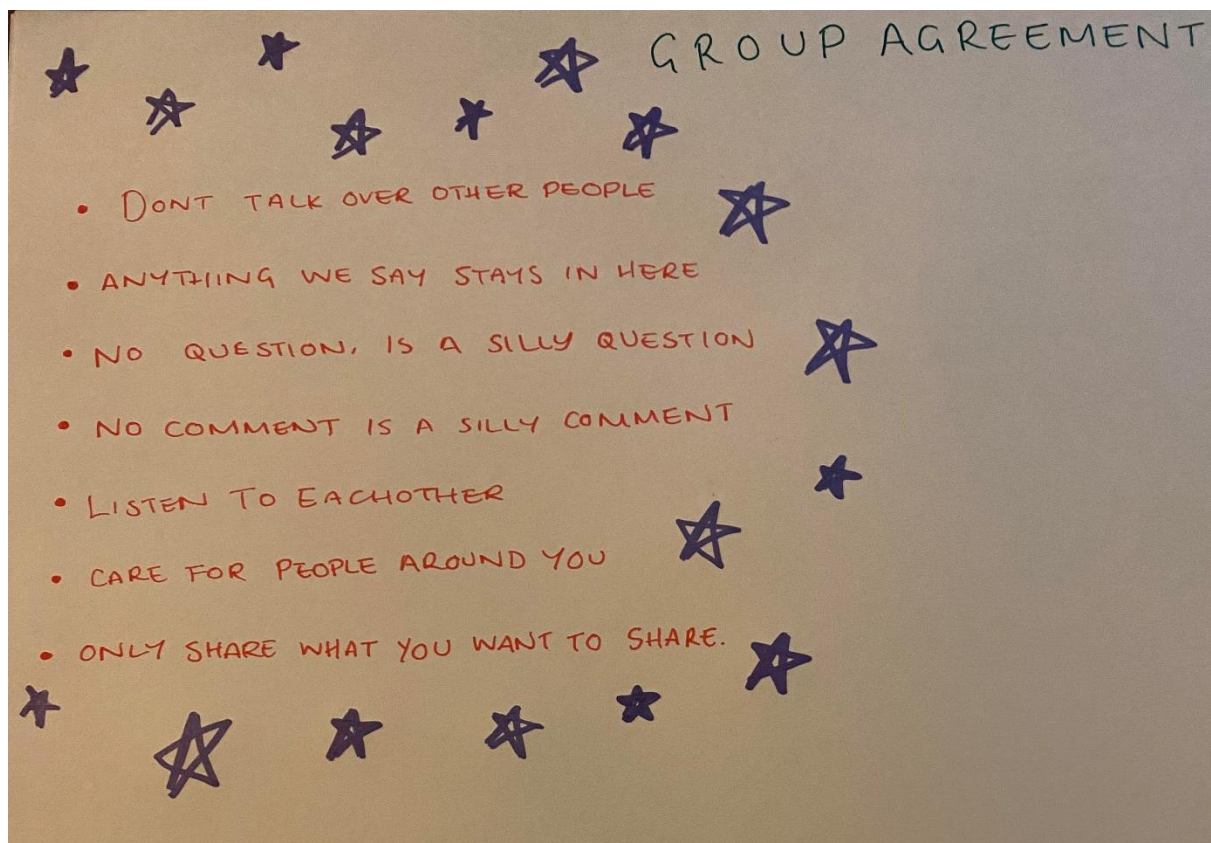
Appendix 18. An example extract of unannotated transcript (Chapter Three – page 70)

To begin all datasets were transcribed; pseudonyms were assignment and line numbers were added.

An example extract from focus group two's transcript

59 *Researcher: So confidentiality seems important, how else would you describe these lessons?*

60 Saul: In the polite way possible a waste of time

61 Wendy: They don't teach us actual valid things, they're just like, they're just like, don't force people
62 to have sex, either go on the pill or use a condom and that's about it.

63 Saul: They kind of just in, in the meantime in Apex we just got taught RE instead

64 Sandra: Or they just tell us not to have sex.

65 Saul: Yeah like they were teaching it to us as if we, like when they were, they were teaching it to us
66 as if we were people who they deemed weren't old enough and mature enough to have sex but this
67 was four years ago now.

68 Trevor: A lot of the things my teachers talked about in the school I went to was, don't watch porn
69 because it ruins sex and all that I saying that it teaches you wrong how to do it and it like fucks up
70 your head basically.

71 Wendy: yeah that's what we've, that's we, they did that one form program. They're like, they did
72 one on contraception, one on consent, but there weren't really that much on it to be honest, this
73 was like, this was like the past few weeks and then one on pornography. Like I get that we need to
74 know like what it is and why it's bad for young people to view it but I don't get why it's more
75 important than teaching us like more about consent and stuff that actually applies to us in real life.

76 Sandra: Especially in this generation of consent

77 Saul: (inaudible)

78 Wendy: But it's cos no one gets taught, but obviously you can't, you can't be apologetic for people
79 who don't respect the idea of, of consent but to a certain extent if people aren't taught about it,
80 they're not gonna know, so they're not gonna know it's wrong necessarily.

81 *Researcher: Sorry did you say it's pressured?*

82 Saul: Like if, yeah, like to an extent if, if a girl didn't want to have sex proceeded to have sex with,
83 and then like she might feel pressured into talking about it because of what or how the boyfriend
84 might react.

85 Wendy: There is a lot of stuff nowadays to do with, um, not, it's not necessarily like we get taught if
86 the don't say yes, don't do it, but we don't really get taught about situations like for example, if
87 someone was really drunk, like say a girl was really drunk, we don't get taught like how, like it's not
88 okay to accept consent from someone if they're that drunk.

89 Saul: If you are at a level where you are also that drunk, then it's not really, yeah, there's nothing
90 you can do but if, if you are relatively sober and you take that as consent, you're basically taking
91 advantage of them.

92 Wendy: But we don't, we don't, they don't tell us, there's nothing, don't get told about, like why
93 that's not okay.

94 *Researcher: Is there anywhere that you could go to for support? So I know you mentioned before*
95 *about the school nurse?*

Initial comments were made for all datasets down the left-hand side of the transcripts. Quotes which would later be assigned an initial code were highlighted yellow for the main research question and green for responses regarding sexual consent.

Focus Group 1

Initial comments	Transcript
-lack of teaching -disparity in primary vs secondary education -topics: consent, respectful relationships, friendship vs romantic - use of technology/videos - teaching unsatisfactory -biology/biological -disparity across quality of lessons / not equal - reliance on videos not fit for purpose -copying information/passive teaching styles -video/cartoon -reliance on videos -societal segregation based on gender - binary view of sex? - reliance on videos not fit for purpose/boring - passive teaching styles /not interactive -one dominant person asks question --barriers to asking questions (discomfort?) -importance of teaching/pupil relationships -primary: girls taught more than boys (periods/mood swings) -hand on learning in primary	*Sid – her/she Kevina – her/she Jeffery – him/he Lewis – him/he Jack – him/he* *Group agreement, consent and rapport all completed off the recording* *Researcher - can you tell me about your experiences of the relationship and sex education curriculum in school to date?* Sid – I've been taught very little but that was in junior school I haven't been taught about anything yet in seniors Kevina – erm we've learned consent, we've learnt how to show respect to other people, so other people so you know the difference between different relationships like friendships between people and like actual relationships between two people and a relationship or link bond with the teachers or a pet or sommet like that Sid - I got a video and that was it *Researcher – could you tell me more about the video please?* Sid - it was just about sex and babies that was it, like just biology and stuff like that (giggling) *Researcher - thank you for sharing that, I know this a different topic to what we would usually discuss at the youth group. Remember if we need to take a break at any point we can do. Can you tell me how would you describe the quality of your sex education lessons?* Kevina - some of them are in like too much detail and then some of them aren't in a lot of detail, so in like some lessons you'll be like putting on one or two videos and it will be like that's the information you have to write about and that was it, so it can be quite mixed Lewis - in one of my lessons they put on like a cartoon Sid - that's all they do put on videos, they put on a video about girls, a video about boys and then they put a sex video on Lewis - and when your in like any of the lessons, sometimes it can be like, it's really boring cos they just do put the video and it is really boring, and I'd rather it be more like interactive so, if you had any questions instead of just one person putting their hand up, like a bunch of people would put their hands up because people actually do have questions they just don't want to share them and I want to feel like you would be able to share it with a teacher you would feel comfortable sharing with Kevina – you learn about in like primary school they put on like a video and the boys go outside and do PE and we will, we'll learn all about periods and all the mood swings and they'll pass around like a product like a pad or a tampon, and then when it's the boys turn the girls have to stay in but they'll like split the room up so like half the girls, so like you'll stay in the same room

Focus Group 2

Trevor: So imagine that's someone that really didn't want their parents to know that they were doing that.

Wendy: Yeah cos there'll be a lot of parents out there who will get vexed.

Researcher: So confidentiality seems important, how else would you describe these lessons?

Saul: In the polite way possible a waste of time

Wendy: They don't teach us actual valid things, they're just like, they're just like, don't force people to have sex, either go on the pill or use a condom and that's about it.

Saul: They kind of just in, in the meantime in Apex we just got taught RE instead

Sandra: Or they just tell us not to have sex.

Saul: Yeah like they were teaching it to us as if we, like when they were, they were teaching it to us as if we were people who they deemed weren't old enough and mature enough to have sex but this was four years ago now.

Trevor: A lot of the things my teachers talked about in the school I went to was, don't watch porn because it ruins sex and all that I saying that it teaches you wrong how to do it and it like fucks up your head basically.

Wendy: yeah that's what we've, that's we, they did that one form program. They're like, they did one on contraception, one on consent, but there weren't really that much on it to be honest, this was like, this was like the past few weeks and then one on pornography. Like I get that we need to know like what it is and why it's bad for young people to view it but I don't get why it's more important than teaching us like more about consent and stuff that actually applies to us in real life.

Sandra: Especially in this generation of consent

Saul: (inaudible)

Wendy: But it's cos no one gets taught, but obviously you can't, you can't be apologetic for people who don't respect the idea of, of consent but to a certain extent if people aren't taught about it, they're not gonna know, so they're not gonna know it's wrong necessarily.

Researcher: Sorry did you say it's pressured?

Saul: Like if, yeah, like to an extent if, if a girl didn't want to have sex proceeded to have sex with, and then like she might feel pressured into talking about it because of what or how the boyfriend might react.

Wendy: There is a lot of stuff nowadays to do with, um, not, it's not necessarily like we get taught if the don't say yes, don't do it, but we don't really get taught about situations like for example, if someone was really drunk, like say a girl was really drunk, we don't get taught like how, like it's not okay to accept consent from someone if they're that drunk.

Saul: If you are at a level where you are also that drunk, then it's not really, yeah, there's nothing you can do but if, if you are relatively sober and you take that as consent, you're basically taking advantage of them.

Wendy: But we don't, we don't, they don't tell us, there's nothing, don't get told about, like why that's not okay.

Researcher: Is there anywhere that you could go to for support? So I know you mentioned before about the school nurse?

Wendy: The school nurse is confidential but the person I spoke to who wasn't the school nurse,

Focus Group 3

	Researcher: That makes sense thank you. Thinking specifically about consent, can you remember when you first taught about it?
	Lila: Definitely high school. Yeah, in high school, yeah I didn't really like properly know what consent was until I was like, I don't know, maybe a few years ago. I wish it was more talked about maybe in primary or something, even if it was just simple just get it out there.
	Julie: Primary was mostly just talking about how it was reproduction, like I mean I know we're all like ten, eleven at that age but still like I feel like it needs to be mentioned.
-feel know enough about consent	Lila: Yeah and as well like when they did that lesson, they separated the boys and the girls, and the girls and learn about their bodies. I know it sounds weird but I like to learn about the other sex as well.
	Julie: It is important cause like not many boys, I feel like not a lot of boys actually know about female reproductive systems and stuff.
-first taught about consent in secondary school	Lila: Definitely.
-would like to be taught about consent earlier	Julie: Like at the grammar school, I'd imagine they probably learn about like female reproductive systems and like biology and stuff.
-talking helps with levels of comfort	Lila: Yeah, definitely biology cos you have too
-primary heavily focused on reproduction	Julie: Going back to like sex education, I know we talking about consent but I feel like um, it's important that you know saying about, talk about pleasure and stuff, it's important that you learn about both sides, like if you're a girl you should learn about both yours and male and then like vice versa, and then like learning about it too late too.
-lessons on reproduction separated by gender	
-boys and girls not taught together in primary school	Lila: Just adding to that learning from a younger age I think as well with learning later on, that's what makes people like zone out and makes it uncomfortable is because you not, if you talk about it from earlier age on, you're more comfortable with the topic.
-boys not knowledgeable about female anatomy	*Researcher: Can you remember if you have been taught anything about the law? For example, what the legal age of consent is?*
-want for mixed sex lessons	
-different content taught in different schools	Lila: They haven't taught you, you just kinda,
-notion biology is most important	Julia: Sixteen isn't it?
	Lila: They don't teach you, you kind of just know yourself, do you know what I mean?
-pleasure should learn about both genders	*Researcher: Could you tell me a little more about that?*
-taught RSE too late	Julie: Well my mum.
-if taught earlier may be more engaged	Lila: I feel like I just picked from it like books and TV shows over the years that
-if taught earlier may be more comfortable	Julie: I feel like X (young person) probably tell us a lot
(need to shift attitudes)	

Interview 1

Left margin annotations:

- reliance on videos
- teachers awkward/ uncomfortable when having to discuss

- CYP don't ask questions feel awkward (*reflection: construct of awkward?*)

- reliance on videos
- complicated explanation, word

- focus on scientific terminology
- delivery in science not Apex

- not taught about how sex actually works/physical process

- tokenistic have to do it
- confusing delivery
- not learnt anything

- would like to have guest speakers

- less reliance on videos when younger
- spoken more about topics when younger

- very scientific terminology
- content not accessible to CYP

- boring
- want to get lessons over

- primary school boys taught less
- confusion as to why boys/girls taught different things
- frustration girls have to go through and learn but boys don't
- girls get twice content
- narrative that it is 'stupid'
- content should be taught 'fairly'

- different teaching approach in secondary school
- 'thankful' mixed sex

- societal view that boy's don't need to learn about periods
- fostering narrative periods are 'gross'

Main text:

Felix: Yeah, thanks

Researcher: Thinking back in terms of teaching styles, how have you been taught about relationship and sex education? What are the lessons like?

Felix: Uh, mostly we just watch videos, uh, mostly cause the teachers would've been like awkward if we like actually talked about it, uh, none the kids really wanted to ask questions because they were all awkward about it (laughed) um, and yeah, mostly it was just videos and then complicated explanations about like how it worked, like scientifically, it was all in science class, it wasn't in like Apex. Yeah, it was all in science. We all talking about like the scientific way, I also thought we would've done it in Apex, yeah, it's like that type of thing, but it was all like scientific, just, uh, just talking about the scientific way not like how it actually like happens, in just like really complicated words, it kind of felt like, uh, they had to do it so they just did it in the most confusing way possible so we didn't actually learn anything from it

Researcher: So, just to check your science teachers taught you. Has anyone else taught you?

Felix: Uh, I don't think I can remember anyone coming in, not that I can remember anyone like coming in and speaking but it would have been good, like when we were younger, uh, like in year six, year five, um, yeah, they didn't play videos because we were younger and we got bored a lot easier uh, so they did talk to us about it but like yeah, it was just all of the top scientific words that no one knew what they meant, so it didn't really mean anything to us, it was just, oh, just a boring in science lesson and you just wanna get it over with it really if you think about it

Researcher: thank you for sharing that, in terms of thinking about like classes, were your classes single or mixed sex? I think you briefly mentioned this before.

Felix: Well, when I was uh, in four and five it was uh, just the girls were pulled aside, none of the boys learnt about it in year four and five, uh, like they didn't teach the boys about it (*periods*) I don't understand why, it's because like, like this is about the period thing by the way, I would've thought like it's weird that they don't want boys to learn about it, but the girls have to learn about it and go through it yeh so the girls literally get twice the amount of it and then the boys get nothing, it's just a bit stupid like I think it would be fair if the girls have to go through it and learn about it, then the boys would have to learn about it too thankfully in like secondary, senior school, secondary school, yeah, uh, it is mixed sex uh but I don't understand why a lot of people are like, don't want boys to know about periods, I just think it's really strange because like they are going to think it's like gross or something, but like if they do then you gotta like teach them that it's not okay to be grossed out by that because it's nature, It just happens, like, and if you think it's weird it is like well, a lot of like, uh, misogynist men uh, go on about like saying women owe everything to them because without them they couldn't be able to make children without

Interview 2

-therapy dogs in school
-therapy dog helps with feelings of comfort

-teachers skills support CYP confidence
-teacher personality
-balance between discipline/ seriousness and being fun
-importance of CYP having opportunities to share stories
-confidence to continue to lessons (disparities)

-teacher sharing personal stories and reflection
-teachers feeling safe to share / nothing too personal

-creating classroom where CYP can share reflections if they want

-teachers promoting confidentiality
-behaviourist approach if found disclosing information

--CYP encouraged to co-construct their own classroom rules
-space for rules to be discussed
-rules: confidentiality and respect
-respect one another and the teacher
-rules are well followed
-consequences/ authoritarian approach if rules broken

Researcher: can you give me any examples of who you would be able to speak too?

Mia: Um well in school you'd normally talk to your head of year, which for me is um luckily a female, and she's also got like a, we've also got like a support dog who like, is like little dog called Marlo who goes around he's like this little like, I think he's like a golden labrador or something like that and he's quite young, he only looks like two years old and um, our head of year, normally got him on a lead and because our tutor um, has got three labradors and he's always got dog treats so um, every morning, Marlo just runs in to our classroom and um, and goes up to the teacher and she'll open the door and give him a dog treat so like you would go up to the head of year and Marlo would be with, Marlo would be with you and you'd like stroke him and he'd like comfort you and he is a trained therapy dog so it's quite useful

Researcher: that is so lovely to hear. Just going back to what you mentioned before about joining in in lessons, can you tell me a little more about that?

Mia: Uh I feel pretty confident because our teachers like a really good teacher cos she's like, she's like one of those teachers where like she's serious if you do something wrong but she's also really fun at the same time, so, and um, like I'm usually contributing in lessons and we usually share little stories about this kind of stuff

Researcher: can you tell me a little bit more about the stories if you feel comfortable to share?

Mia: The teacher, well when we're doing that kind of lessons, like the teacher shared stories about like, like nothing like super super personal, but once we were talking about, um cause our teachers got some kids, we were talking about um, giving birth and and one of the people in the class put put her hand, she put her hand up and said my mom was in labour with me for, for four days and we were just discussion stuff like that and I found out the teacher was one of those blue babies who had like umbilical core wrapped around the neck and there's another girl in my class who um, turns out she, they thought that she was blind when she was born cos one of her eyes was closed and it didn't open until she was two years old and it's always a bit blurry in that eye and um, on our first PSHE lesson, the teacher was talking about um, like how classified this is and she said if anyone's seen sharing these stories outside of the classroom, then you'll get detention

Researcher: can you tell me any more about that?

Mia: Yeah we have to write like a thing on the front of book saying you put, you put I then your name and then you then it's like, then you have to tick, then you have to like write your own rules that you'd, that you follow but we all discuss them as a class so they're rules like I will not share this information outside of the classroom, I will not like mock anyone else when they're sharing the stories, I'll be respectful of um, the teacher and the students and all that and it's like helpful, because yes, because everyone follows them because they know the punishments that um, like are available if you if you don't follow them and it's like really like, well kept the rules

Interview 3

-use of videos as teaching tool -how to spot signs of a abuse/controlling relationship -signposting to services	**Researcher: Can you tell me a little more about that?** Sage: Um, we watched a video which was like, um, this girl and like her boyfriend was like toxic and was like hitting her and stuff, but she felt like she couldn't speak how she felt, like she thought it was like a good relationship and he wasn't letting her go on her phone, and like really like cramping her, but she felt it was a good relationship and at the end she like disappeared cos she felt like she would disappear, if she wasn't there, he wasn't letting her talk to her friends and stuff like that so it was like how to be like aware of that and at the end of the video it was like all, like all the slides and stuff of like the numbers to call
	Researcher: Okay thank you for sharing that. I am just wondering how helpful did you find these lessons?
-videos are relatable / relevant -videos informative and important -CYP want to be taught about these topics	Sage: like I feel like if I was in a toxic relationship and I was watching that, I definitely feel like I'll be able to say like, oh well that's, that's like, that's what my boyfriend's doing or stuff like that. Like it felt life, I guess relevant, like relevant to real life even though I haven't been in a relationship, like I can see how important, like um, like how important it is to tell us these things
	Researcher: That's helpful to know. Can you tell me a little about how you were taught? I know you mentioned the cup of tea video, can you remember anything else?
-interactive teaching styles -use of worksheet and visuals -appropriateness of role play -heavy emphasis on note taking	Sage: In the LGBTQ thing we did like quizzes of like they'd showed, they showed us all the flags or like some of the flags and they asked us to draw them and then like label them underneath which was good what we thought they were like so we did quizzes in some of them um, in, in the, in like the peer and peer I think we did a lot of worksheets which was good, I don't think, I don't think we did any like actual like hands on stuff because you can't really with that subject and we had like a, a lot of boring note taking as well on like what to yeah, stuff like that

Appendix 20. Stage two: *'Coding'* – extract of codes from focus group two (Chapter Three – page 70)

At stage two the entire datasets were coded in response to the two research questions. Initial codes in response to the main research question are shown in yellow and initial codes in response to consent are shown in green.

<u>Example initial codes for main research question</u>

	FOCUS GROUP 2 Code Sweep 1 - Familiarisation	**FOCUS GROUP 2** Code Sweep 2 - Research Question 1	**FOCUS GROUP 2** *Quotes*	**FOCUS GROUP 2** Initial Subtheme
153 154				
155	taught content in different lessons	Learning about RSE in other lessons	*in the meantime in Apex we just got taught RE instead*	Disparity education setting
156	-content: teaching abstinence	Discourage sexual activities	*they just tell us not to have sex*	Discouraging sexual activities
157	-age and maturity factors	Hindering teacher skills	*they were teaching it to us as if we were people who they deemed weren't old enough and mature enough to have sex*	Teacher perceptions
158	-negative narrative around porn	Negative narratives around porn	*don't watch porn because it ruins sex and all that I saying that it teaches you wrong how to do it and it like fucks up your head basically*	Negative narratives
159	- taught content in different lessons/contents	Learning about RSE in other lessons	*they did that one form program*	Disparity education setting
160	- taught content in different lessons/contents	Learning about RSE in other lessons	*they did it more in biology than in Apex*	
161	-lack of information	Lack of teaching	*there weren't really that much on it to be honest*	Teaching quality
162	-topics not applicable to real life	Topic not relevant to experience	*stuff that actually applies to us in real life.*	Topic relevance
163	-school nurse as a trusted adult	Nurse as preferred educator	*school nurse is confidential*	Teaching delivery
164	-role of friends as support	Friends as support networks	*ever really talk about stuff like that is just friends to other friends*	Role of friends
165	-lack of adults in school can speak too	Opening up to teachers	*there's a few teachers who like I know in the school I could go and talk to*	Support in school

Example initial codes for sub research question

	FOCUS GROUP 2	FOCUS GROUP 2	FOCUS GROUP 2	FOCUS GROUP 2
	Code Sweep 1 - Familiarisation	Code Sweep 2 - Research Question 2	*Quotes*	Initial Subtheme
94				
95				
96	-some topics seem more taught about than others	Consent is not prioritised as a topic	*I don't get why it's more important than teaching us like more about consent*	*missing information*
97	-consent is about asking / have to check with the person	Asking/seeking permission	*You ask it to the person you intend on having sexual intercourse with, just check if it's, if they're okay*	seeking permission
98	-permission (-without don't do anything)	Asking/seeking permission	*Making sure you've got permission and that you don't do anything without it*	seeking permission
99	-consent should be verbal	Consent should be verbal	*making sure it's verbal like*	definition
100	-consent should be verbal	Consent should be verbal	*someone might seem like they want to, but if they haven't specifically said don't do anything*	definition
101	-consent can be redacted during activities, pay attention, non verbal cues	Being able to redact consent	*pay attention because midway through they might not say anything but if someone don't wanna do it anymore, the chance are you'll be able to tell*	redacting consent
102	-video (cup of tea)	Cup of tea video - tea analogy for consent	*We got shown the cuppa tea video*	teaching method - video
103	-tea as an analogy for sex	Cup of tea video - tea analogy for consent	*If they don't want tea...Don't give them tea*	teaching method - video
104	-protection priority over consent	Consent is not prioritised as a topic	*they prioritise really is making sure that you use protection, they talk about that a lot more than consent*	protection
105	-consent key word 'yes' (binary)	Binary definition	*we've learned if someone doesn't say yes, don't do anything*	binary definition
106	content lacking	Lack of content	*but nothing else like other than that really*	topic relevance
107	-content is not useful/relatable	Content not meaningful or relevant	*not a lot of useful stuff*	topic relevance
108	-video (cup of tea)	Cup of tea video - tea analogy for consent	*Tea is the key word for sex*	teaching method - video
109	-tea as an analogy for sex	Cup of tea video - tea analogy for consent	*there's a man who's offering someone tea and it's like if the person doesn't ask for tea, don't give them tea, if the person is unconscious, don't try to feed them tea*	teaching method - video
110	-tea as an analogy for sex	Cup of tea video - tea analogy for consent	*basically tea means sex*	teaching method - video
111	-tea as an analogy for sex	Cup of tea video - tea analogy for consent	*if they want the tea they're allowed to have the tea*	teaching method - video

Appendix 21. Stage two: 'Coding' – list of all initial codes (Chapter Three – page 70)

A table of all the initial codes was created for both research questions. In total there were 92 initial codes for the main research question and 48 initial codes for the sub-research question.

Initial codes for main research question

Code Sweep 2 - Initial subthemes	Count of Code Sweep 2
Alternative arrangements	7
Avaliability of contraception	2
Barriers to asking questions	8
Biological focus	11
Books source of information	2
Boys lack knowledge	7
Comedy videos help comfort levels	3
Consequences of confidential information being sh	7
Content not clear	6
Content repetative	4
Content too simplisitic	6
CYP disengaged	7
CYP feel able to speak to parents	6
CYP want to learn	6
Discomfort around curriculum specific terminology	6
Discomfort around sanitary products	3
Discourage sexual activities	1
Exposure to topics helps comfort levels	7
External educator	8
Facilitating personal characteristics of teacher	19
Facilitating teacher skills	22
Friends as educators	4
Friends as support networks	11
Gendered curriculum	15
Gendered views in society	7
Hetronormative agenda	3
Hindering personal characteristics of teacher	7
Hindering teacher skills	17
Impact of COVID	6
Importance of conversations	11
Incidental conversations	5
Inconsistency in teaching quality	5

Internet source of information	1
Keeping information confidential	13
Lack of communication between teachers	3
Lack of parental support	6
Lack of support and signposting	3
Lack of teaching	9
Learning about RSE in other lessons	15
Lessons boring	8
Lessons can be uncomfortable for CYP	11
LGBTQ+ agenda	9
Mental health	1

Narrative around sexual activites is negative	3
Negative narrative around masturbation	
Negative narrative around periods	3
Negative narratives around porn	2
Not taught about kinks	2
Not taught about masturbation	5
Not taught about pleasure	7
Not taught how to have sex	6
Not taught how to improve sex life	2
Nurse as preferred educator	12
Opening up to teachers	14
Parents as educator	2
Passive teaching style	4
Preference interactive lessons	6
Preferred ways to seek support	6
Prewarning about lesson content	12
Reliance on videos	8
Respecting and fostering confidentiality in the clas	12
Seating arrangements important	15
Social media source of information	5
Social media teaching tool	2
Support is not individualised	10

Support services in school	7
Teacher characteristic same sex	11
Teacher perceptions of accessing support	7
Terminology accessible	4
Topic not relevant to experience	8
Topic taught too late	7
Trusting teachers	6
TV source of information	4
Video content gendered	4
Videos inadequate	8
Teaching curriculum specific terminology	8
Knowledgeable, skilled educator	6
Facilitating participation	13
Behaviour management	6
Maturity	7
Learning about the opposite gender	14
Mixed classes	3
LGBTQ+ peer support is tokenistic	7
Content not memorable	6
Age/year content is taught is important	12
Topic not inclusive of different cultures	2
Consequences of laughter	13
Poor behaviour hinders learning	4
Poor behaviour from minority	8
Strategies to make CYP feel more comfortable	4
Protecting wellbeing of teacher	3
Generational shift	2

Initial codes for sub research question

Code Sweep 2 - Initial subthemes	Count of Code Sweep 2
Cup of tea video - tea analogy for consent	18
Binary definition	13
Lack of content	12
Asking/seeking permission	11
CYP have experienced unhealthy relationships	9
Content not meaningful or relevant	9
Consent applies to different circumstances	8
Being able to say no	7
Missed topics - how to manage situations	7
Media source of information	6
Content taught too late	6
Pressures to have sex	6
Videos/scenarios as teaching tools	5
Parents source of information	5
Not taught about coercive and controlling relations	5
Consent linked to nature of relationship	5
Un/healthy relationships - identifying signs	5
Curriculum specific terminology	5
Effects of alcohol - lack of teaching	5
Strategies to make CYP feel more comfortable	4
Consent should be verbal	4
lack of knowledge around legal aspects of conser	4
Lack of support	4
Un/healthy relationships - how to support others	4
Being able to redact consent	4
Supportive parents	4
How to utilise videos	4
Content not memorable	4
Uncertainty around if it is consent	4
Negative narrative around relationships	3
Consent is not prioritised as a topic	3
Effects of alcohol - giving consent	3
Content repetative	3
Un/healthy relationships	3
Feeling ready	3
Not taught about cheating	3
Comfortable being single	3
Effects of alcohol - taking responsibility	3
Videos/scenarios relevant to CYP	3
Missed topics - what is right and wrong	2
Not taught how to act in a relationship	2
Negative expereinces	2
RSE should not be assessed	2
Signposting to support	2
Lack more knowledge around legal aspects more	1
CYP feel they know the answers	1
Prewarning	1
Comfortable being your own person	1

At this stage the researcher began to cluster and collate codes into subthemes and themes. To aid this process the researcher created multiple thematic maps. After the initial generation of themes, the researcher realised they were too descriptive and not analytical.

Initial thematic maps (V.1)

*negative narrative around masturbation / periods / porn / sexual activities

Respecting and fostering confidentiality in the classroom

Alternative arrangements

Seating arrangement

Ensuring CYP feel safe in class

CYP want to learn

Lessons can be uncomfortable for CYP

Prewarning about lesson content

Exposure to topics helps comfort levels

Strategies to make CYP feel more comfortable

Poor behaviour hinders learning

Consequence of laughter

Poor behaviour from minority

Behaviour management

Maturity

Discomfort around sanitary products

Behaviour in lessons

Feeling safe and comfortable

Comfort vs awkward vs wanting to learning

Participation in lessons

CYP disengaged

Facilitating participation

Barriers to asking questions

Consequences of confidential information being shared

Content not clear

Content not memorable

Mixed classes

Content repetitive

Gendered curriculum

Content too simplistic

Boys lack knowledge

Quality of content

Learning about the opposite gender

Gendered views in society

Not taught how to have sex

Sex positive topics important to CYP not taught*

Topic not inclusive of different cultures

Curriculum does not cover topics important to CYP

Tackling a gendered curriculum

Curriculum

Topic taught too late

Age/year content is taught is important

Topic not relevant to experience

Topic relevance

Tackling a heteronormative scientific agenda

Biological focus

Heteronormative agenda

LGBTQ+ agenda

LGBTQ+ peer support is tokenistic

* Not taught – how to improve sex life / pleasure / masturbation

Topic and sources of information

Insufficient quality in RSE
- Lack of teaching
- Impact of COVID
- Inconsistency in teaching quality

Friends
- Friends as educators
- Friends as support network

Sources of information*
- Learning about RSE in other lessons
- Alterative sources of information external to school *

Parents as support / educators
- Parents as educators
- CYP feel able to speak to parents
- Lack of parental support

* TV / internet / books / social media

CYP understanding of consent

Defining consent
- Binary definition
- Asking/seeking permission
- Consent applies to different circumstance
- Consent should be verbal
- Consent links to nature of relationship

Applying consent to the real world
- Pressures to have sex
- Being able to redact consent
- Being able to say no
- Negative experience
- Feeling ready
- Uncertainty around if it is consent

First diagram — Central circle: "Teaching of consent remains insufficient V1"

Connected circles and their associated boxes:

Quality of consent curriculum
- Curriculum specific terminology
- Content taught too late
- Content not meaningful or relevant
- Consent is not prioritised as a topic
- Lack of content
- Content not memorable
- Content repetitive

Un/healthy relationships*
- CYP have experienced unhealthy relationships
- Un/healthy relationships – how to support others
- Un/healthy relationships – identifying signs
- Negative narrative around relationships
- Un/healthy relationships

Topics not covered – disparity across schools*
- Not taught - how to act in a relationship
- Missed topic - what is right/wrong
- Not taught – coercive/ controlling relationships
- Missed topic – how to manage situations
- Lack knowledge around legal aspects
- Not taught about cheating

Disparity teaching about effects of alcohol*
- Effects of alcohol – taking responsibility
- Effects of alcohol – lack of teaching
- Effects of alcohol – giving consent

*alcohol and unhealthy relationships could be combined with real life skills

Second diagram — Central circle: "Teaching of consent remains insufficient V2"

Teaching tools
- How to utilise videos
- Cup of tea video – tea analogy for consent
- Videos/scenarios as teaching tools
- Videos/scenarios relevant to real life

Specific support around consent
- Signposting to support
- Lack of support

Sources of information
- Discussing consent with paretns
- Media as a source of information

*alcohol and unhealthy relationships could be combined with real life skills

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At this stage the researcher reviewed the themes and subthemes and referred to the original quotes and datasets. The research used pen and paper to allow fluidity to this process.

Examples of subthemes and quotes from across the datasets

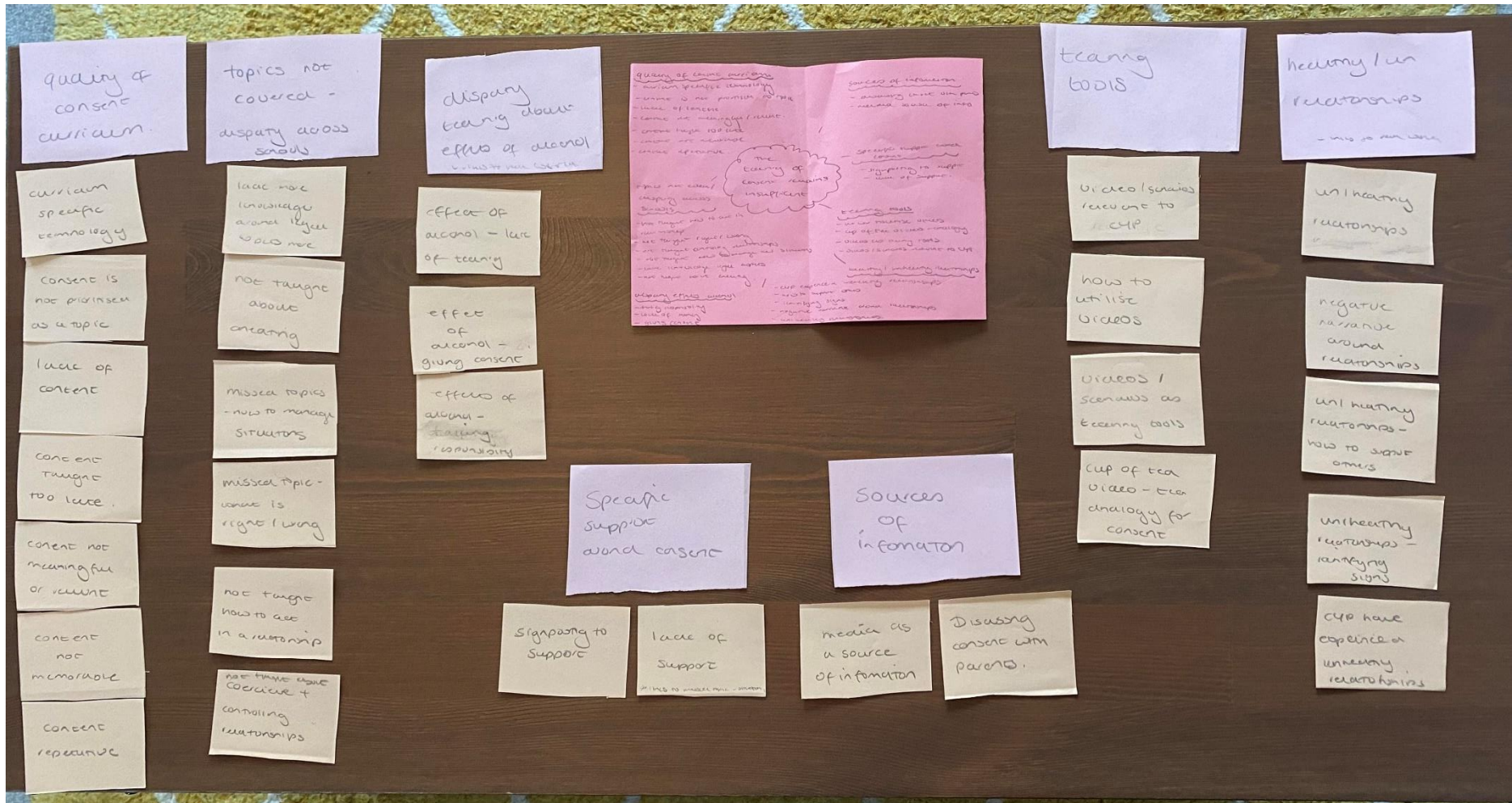| Code Sweep 2	Quotes
⊟ **Topic not relevant to experience**	Exactly no twelve year old is gonna wanna sit and listen about sex
	I'm in year ten and they just like I don't know, they don't feel that relevant
	like I don't know whether we need to know these things
	like I've been on and off with my girlfriend, back and forth, back and forth and like they don't really tell you how to manage that so yeah it's just confusing
	stuff that actually applies to us in real life.
	they just don't seem to get that like everything isn't as easy as they make it out to be
	they just tell you about things that aren't really real life, like they tell you about things that we just haven't done yet
	They tell us when we're like twelve, it's like we're not gonna go around having sex when we're twelve
Topic not relevant to experience Total	
⊟ **Nurse as preferred educator**	it's rather for your safety to go to a GP or your local doctors
	Definitely a nurse
	I think I preferred the nurse
	I'd want nurses
	in year five we had nurses coming to junior school to talk about it instead of the actually teachers
	it will be like that's the information you have to write about and that was it
	like in primary school you were taught by a nurse and then now in year seven or year eight or whatever year you are in, it's kind of like not as good
	nurses because erm, they like, that's what they do, they look after you
	school nurse is confidential
	someone that's maybe like, like a nurse
	that is good, that makes it better
	like a nurse
Nurse as preferred educator Total	
⊟ **Negative narratives around porn**	don't watch porn because it ruins sex and all that I saying that it teaches you wrong how to do it and it like fucks up your head basically
	why watching porn could be bad for young people like cause of the stuff it shows
Negative narratives around porn Total	
⊟ **Learning about RSE in other lessons**	, remembered doing an assembly on forced marriage, like, like we have our assemblies every Thursday morning
	I also thought we would've done it in Apex
	I picked child development...I had to learn about the girls stuff like the periods and the contraception
	in biology we're learning about different contraceptive methods at the moment
	in the meantime in Apex we just got taught RE instead
	it was all in science class. it wasn't in like Apex
Learning about RSE in other lessons Total	
Lack of teaching	I haven't been taught about anything yet in seniors
	in PSHE one lesson we did the puberty but that was it
	one a week every half term or every other half term or something like that, not much at all
	taught very little
	that was just like a lesson want it
	they don't like specifically teach it
	they teach it like once, I think they should teach it every year
	Uh, well not much
	there weren't really that much on it to be honest
Lack of teaching Total	
Hindering teacher skills	actually he is being strict, it is just like not helpful, he's got a certain way of teaching
	don't know if they're like shouting at you for talking or whatever
	he says like you can't talk in my classes, and he'll say I'm not being strict your just not allowed to talk
	he'd be like let's not do this and we can move on
	if you've got a cover in sex education it's just dramatic
	on the other hand he's really strict
	some teachers who do it really babyishly and there are always like giggling everything and that's not like good
	Strict
	teachers and supplies and when it's supplies its awful
	there's a bunch of really s*** ones
	they were teaching it to us as if we were people who they deemed weren't old enough and mature enough to have sex
	the teacher yells at the entire class
	they just tell you off or give you verbal's or written's or whatever they don't actually tell you what to do2
	if you don't know what to do you'll just get a written for it like they don't help
	in the teachers head it's like if you don't look at them you can't hear them, it's like not always easy when I feel uncomfortable
	when I'm not looking at the teacher they think I'm not listening
	you have to look at them to hear them, but then you get told off for looking at them
Hindering teacher skills Total	
Friends as support networks	and my best friend too
	cos you're like same age and you feel more comfortable
	ever really talk about stuff like that is just friends to other friends
	feel like personally I'd rather talk to a friend about it

Example of thematic maps for RSE and consent (V2)

Quality of consent curriculum.

- curriculum specific technology
- consent is not prioritised as a topic
- lack of content
- consent taught too late.
- content not meaningful or relevant
- content not memorable
- content repetitive

topics not covered - disparity across school

- lack more knowledge around illegal solos nae
- not taught about creating
- missed topics - how to manage situations
- missed topic - what is right/wrong
- not taught how to act in a relationship
- not taught about coercive + controlling relationships

disparity teaching about effect of alcohol

- effect of alcohol - lack of teaching
- effect of alcohol - giving consent
- effects of alcohol - teaching responsibility

teaching tools

- video/scenarios relevant to CYP
- how to utilise videos
- videos/scenarios as teaching tools
- cup of tea video - tea analogy for consent

healthy/un relationships

- unhealthy relationships
- negative narrative around relationships
- unhealthy relationships - how to support others
- unhealthy relationships - identifying signs
- CYP have experience of unhealthy relationships

Specific support around consent

- signposting to support
- lack of support

Sources of information

- media as a source of information
- discussing consent with parents.

At this stage the researcher gave each theme and subtheme a clear, specific and unique label to allow boundaries between themes. The thematic maps were revised for the third time. To support transparency of the study, theme names were slightly tweaked during stage 6, the write up.

<u>Revised thematic map (V.2)</u>
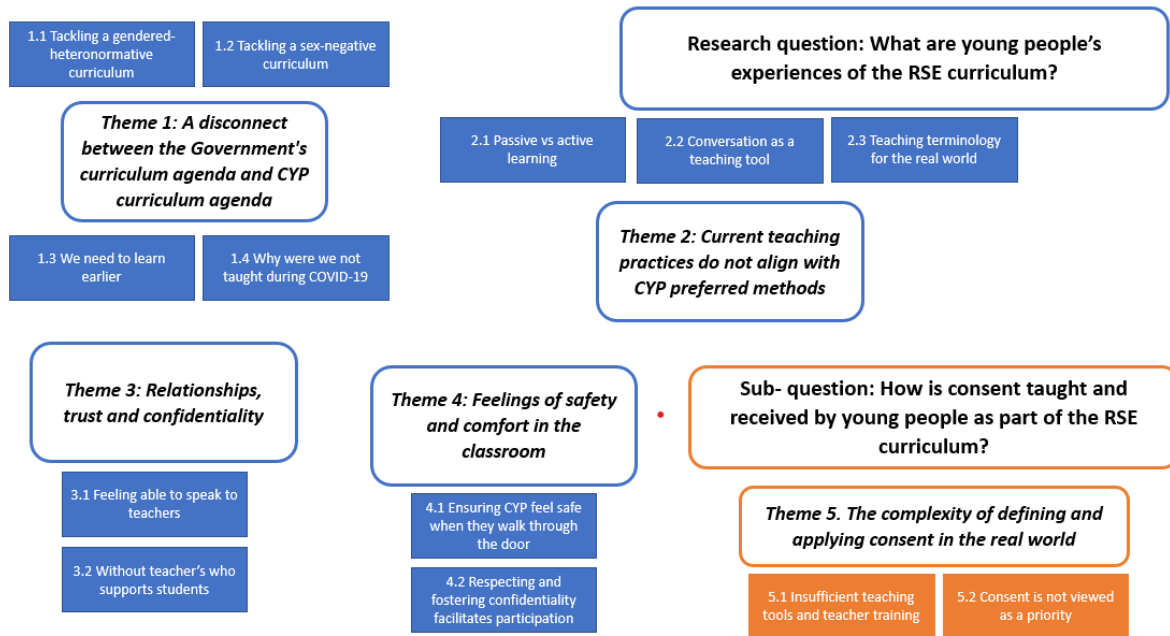
Appendix 25. Dissemination letter sent to the youth group staff to distribute to parents and guardians of the young people who took part in the study.

School of Psychology – Guardian Debrief Sheet

University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

A qualitative exploration of young people's experiences of how consent is taught as part of the Relationship and Sex Education curriculum.

Ethics Approval Number: S1425
Researcher: Sophie Cave - sophie.cave@nottingham.ac.uk Supervisor:
Russell Hounslow - russell.hounslow@nottingham.ac.uk

The aim of this research was to explore young people's experiences of the Relationship and Sex Education curriculum, with an additional focus on how consent is taught in schools. The research is invaluable as there is not a lot known about this topic.

Findings
It felt important to share the findings of this study with you as parents, carers, and youth group staff. Sharing a summary of the research findings allows for transparency of knowledge, as well as offering an opportunity for further signposting and support.

Overall, it was suggested by the young people who took part in the study that the Relationship and Sex Education curriculum which is currently taught in schools remains unsatisfactory.

The main findings suggested that aspects of the curriculum that are important to young people is not the same as that written in government policy. Many young people spoke about wanting a curriculum which is inclusive, age appropriate and discusses relationships in a more positive way.

Many young people also discussed a disconnect between teaching approaches, instead aspiring for lessons which are engaging and delivered by confident and knowledgeable educators. Young people also spoke about the need for a learning environment which fosters feelings of safety and comfort, and a school system which allows for young people to seek support and guidance from trusting adults.

Older young people were asked about their understanding of sexual consent and how it has been taught in schools. The findings suggested that there are discrepancies in young people's knowledge of sexual consent, thus suggesting a possible need for a greater education around healthy relationships and keeping young people safe.

Support and advice
We hope that young people enjoyed taking part in the study, and we are grateful for the contribution that they made about this important topic. As was described in the original study information sheet, young people were provided with an opportunity to discuss any concerns that they might have held after taking part in a focus group of interview and a list of charities or organisations that could provide further advice or support was made available. I have listed this information again below, in case it is useful for your as a parent or guardian

Childline
Website: https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/friends-relationships-sex/sex-relationships/
Contact: https://www.childline.org.uk/get-support/

Brook
Website: https://www.brook.org.uk/topics/sex/ Contact:
https://www.brook.org.uk/find-a-service/

Disrespect NoBody
Website: https://www.disrespectnobody.co.uk/
Contact: https://www.disrespectnobody.co.uk/need-help/

Rape Crisis
Website: https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-informed/about-sexual-violence/sexual-consent/ Contact:
https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-help/want-to-talk/

I hope the following helps to summarise the research findings and offers further support to you as a parent or guardian. If you have any remaining questions, please contact me via the email at the top of this page.

Sophie Cave

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact: Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)
stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk