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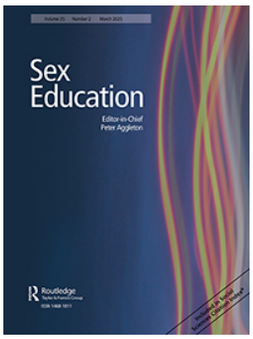

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Teachers' perceptions and experiences of delivering LGBTQ+ inclusive Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in England

Claire L. Fox[a] and Melanie Riley[b]

[a]School of Education, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK; [b]School of Education, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK

ABSTRACT

Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) guidance for schools in England outlines the 'compulsory' teaching of LGBTQ+ identities. This study aimed to investigate teachers' perceptions and experiences of delivering the curriculum. In total, 72 teachers in England responded to an online survey. Responses to the closed survey questions indicated variability in terms of having access to adequate resources and training, feeling confident, and having adequate support from their school and parents. Two main categories with sub-categories were identified from the open-ended responses that reflect the challenges of delivery and suggestions for improvement. A key issue identified was how to teach children about gender identity, with concerns about 'gender ideology' being expressed by some teachers. Teacher confidence was reported to be low, with problems in some schools of a lack of leadership and parental support, as well as an unhelpful school culture, particularly in faith schools. To conclude, although there are schools where LGBTQ+ inclusive RSE appears to be working well, teachers lack confidence and the necessary resources. When combined with a lack of support from school leaders, parents, and policy makers, this makes it challenging for teachers to advance an LGBTQ+ inclusive agenda as part of RSE.

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Introduction

LGBTQ+[1] inclusion in schools is vital to increase visibility, whilst creating safer spaces that affirm and support LGBTQ+ young people. Research shows high rates of mental health problems are reported among LGBTQ+ young people in the UK (e.g. Just Like Us 2021), and statistics show that LGBTQ+ students in the UK are twice as likely to experience school bullying, compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers (Diversity Role Models 2020). Microaggressions, such as use of heterosexist language, assumptions about a universal LGB experience, exoticisation, and discomfort/disapproval of the LGB experience, are also commonplace (Nadal et al. 2011). LGBTQ inclusive school policies are associated with more positive experiences and perceptions of school climate for LGBTQ young people (Day et al. 2020). A critical analysis of the RSE[2] government policy for

CONTACT Claire L. Fox claire.fox@bristol.ac.uk

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schools in England drawing on minority stress theory, cautioned that a lack of LGBTQ+ content will lead to a worsening of the statistics outlined above (Glazzard and Stones 2021).

Good quality sexuality education (SE) has been reported to bring many benefits such as preventing the risks of HIV and other STIs, unplanned pregnancy, and enabling young people to make better decisions about their sexuality and relationships (UNESCO 2018). A recent review of nine articles highlights the consequences of non-inclusive sex education, which leaves LGBTQ young people ill-equipped to navigate their sexual health and relationships safely (Epps, Markowski, and Cleaver 2021). LGBTQ+ young people have referred to the 'invisibility' of LGBTQ+ identities in the Personal, Social, Health Education (PSHE) curriculum and have expressed a desire for support to help them navigate sex and relationships (Formby and Donovan 2020). In the absence of good quality SE, some LGBTQ+ young people have been found to turn to other forms of education such as the Internet and pornography (Naser et al. 2020). LGBTQ young people have also expressed a preference for the responsibility for the teaching of SE to be within the school system and not the family (Rubinsky and Cooke-Jackson 2021).

Current RSE guidance for schools in England now outline 'compulsory' teaching about LGBT identities and families (DFE 2020a). Primary schools in particular are encouraged to teach inclusive LGBT+ Relationships Education by exploring different family structures including LGBT+ parents. The guidance for primary schools is more open than that for secondary schools, leaving schools to decide what is appropriate. Yet, DFE documentation also make it clear that primary schools will not be penalised for not including LGBT content if they can demonstrate they have consulted with parents (DFE 2020b).

Making the current RSE guidance compulsory should, in principle, support teachers to deliver LGBTQ+ inclusive RSE. However, the lack of specificity within the primary school guidance creates ambiguity which, in turn, raises questions about the extent to which LGBTQ+ inclusivity can be achieved in schools. For example, early on, the compulsory nature of RSE provoked backlash in communities with high levels of parents of faith. The 'No Outsiders programme' (Moffat 2020) at Parkfield Community (Primary) School, Birmingham, sparked heated protests outside the school gates when some objected to LGBTQ+ inclusive Relationships Education. Moral and religious discourses frequently normalise childhood innocence especially in relation to sexuality and gender identity (Atkinson et al. 2022). The Birmingham case brought the issue of LGBTQ+ equality to the fore and made LGBT teachers more visible, potentially creating heightened levels of anxiety in relation to the teaching of RSE (Lee 2020).

A recent evaluation of LGBTQ inclusive education in four English primary schools serving faith communities highlighted problems with how LGBTQ issues were addressed (Carlile 2020). For example, LGBTQ+ people and issues were often included within the anti-bullying agenda and RSE, which can be overly pathologising and sexualising. In some schools, there was also a lack of confidence on the part of teachers who feared saying the wrong thing, often closing down 'teachable moments'. There was also resistance from some teachers who refused to undertake the training.

Lack of confidence among teachers who feel unsupported to teach RSE has consequences for the quality of education children and young people receive. An early survey of young people by the Sex Education Forum (2008) found that pupils who described the experience of sex and relationships education as bad or very bad said this was due to the

fact that the teacher did not have the skills or confidence to teach them. A more recent study shows that little has changed: a lack of resources and training persists, and there are complex challenges such as wider societal discourse about RSE and a culture of anxiety to contend with (Stevens 2023).

Debate over the knowledge that is considered 'appropriate' for children and young people to learn, and when they should learn it, continues to overshadow evidence revealing a major gap between what children and young people want to learn in RSE and their learning experience in school (Sex Education Forum 2023). In some schools and in society more widely, there is a desire to preserve children's ignorance of social realities by censoring 'difficult knowledge'. This dominant narrative claims that children are 'too young' to process knowledge about sex, gender, sexuality and relationships both emotionally and cognitively (Robinson 2013).

In December 2023, the then Conservative UK government published non-statutory guidance for schools which stated that schools have no duty to allow students to socially transition and parents should be informed if they wish to do so (DFE 2023a). This could result in a further reduction in engagement with sex, gender and sexuality diversity as part of RSE and in schools more generally, with teachers being afraid of saying the wrong thing. The non-statutory guidance was heavily criticised at the time by LGBTQ+ organisations, who raised concerns that it was likely to make schools less safe for trans and non-binary students and create further confusion for teachers (Mermaids 2024).

In the light of the above, it is vitally important to understand teachers' perspectives and experiences on LGBTQ+ inclusive RSE. This study is therefore well timed to contribute to current policy debates and future RSE guidance. Drawing on online survey responses from 72 teachers, the research sought to examine: what are teachers' perceptions of the current quality of LGBTQ+ inclusive RSE; what are the perceived challenges of delivering LGBTQ+ inclusive RSE; and what are teachers' suggestions for improving the delivery of LGBTQ+ inclusive RSE?

Methods

Research design

Our study used a mixed-methods design and adopted a pragmatic approach. No specific theory guided the research; rather, an exploratory approach was adopted, with a focus on informants' perspectives and experiences of the issues concerned. Although several of the questions were closed, many were open, with an inductive approach being taken to the analysis of open-ended responses. We used a 'convergent design' which involved collecting quantitative and qualitative data in parallel, analysing the data separately, and then combining the findings to reach conclusions.

Participants

An email invitation was sent to the head teacher at every primary school and secondary school within a total of 27 local authorities in England, in an attempt to ensure a wide spread across the country. The survey was also shared on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter), in a bid to elicit more participants. In total, 72 teachers responded

to the online survey. Forty-seven of the respondents (65%) were 'primary school' teachers and 25 (35%) were 'secondary school' teachers; 15 (21%) worked in a 'faith school' and 57 (79%) a 'non-faith school'. The mean age of the teachers was 40 years (SD = 10.58) with a range from 23 to 64 years. The average for the number of years working as a qualified teacher was 14 (SD = 9.34), ranging from 2 to 44 years.

In terms of gender, 13 (18%) self-identified as 'male', 49 (68%) as 'female' and 1 (1%) 'non-binary'. A further 9 teachers indicated they identified 'in another way'; of these, 1 indicated they were 'gender fluid' and the remaining participants gave responses such as they had a 'sex not a gender'. When asked about whether they identified as transgender, only 2 (3%) teachers indicated 'yes', 69 (96%) 'no', and 1 (1%) 'in some ways'. With regard to sexual orientation, 8 (11%) of respondents identified as 'lesbian', 9 (13%) as 'gay', 11 (15%) as 'bisexual', 40 (56%) as 'straight/heterosexual', and 4 (6%) responded 'in another way'. Of these 4 respondents, 2 identified as 'asexual' and 1 stated they 'object to the term "straight"' but did not elaborate.

The majority of the respondents were 'White' ($N = 65$, 90%), 1 was 'Black' (1%), 4 (6%) came from from 'mixed or multiple ethnic groups', and 2 (3%) preferred to 'self-describe' (1 of these indicated they were 'White European'). None of the respondents identified as 'Asian' or 'Arab'. Finally, 50 (69%) respondents indicated they had 'no religion', 18 (25%) identified as 'Christian', 1 (1%) indicated 'in another way' ('spiritual') and 3 (4%) indicated they preferred 'not to say'.

Materials

Participants were first asked for demographic information about age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and religion; whether they taught in a primary or secondary school, a faith or non-faith school; and for how long they had been a teacher. They were then asked a range of closed questions relating to their perceptions and experiences of delivering LGBTQ+ inclusive RSE with space to elaborate on their answers (see Table 1). There were two additional open-ended questions that asked about the challenges of delivering LGBTQ+ inclusive RSE and for suggestions on how to make LGBTQ+ inclusive RSE as effective as it can be. A summary of responses to these questions is in Table 2.

Table 1. Responses to the closed survey questions.

	No, not at all	Yes, to some extent	Yes, definitely
Do you have adequate resources to deliver LGBTQ+ inclusive Relationships and Sex Education (RSE)?	14(19%)	38(53%)	20(28%)
Have you had adequate training to deliver LGBTQ+ inclusive Relationships and Sex Education (RSE)?	14(19%)	38(53%)	20(28%)
Do you feel confident to deliver LGBTQ+ inclusive Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) well?	14(19%)	31(43%)	27(38%)
Do you have adequate support from your school (e.g. senior management, colleagues, governors) to deliver LGBTQ+ inclusive Relationships and Sex Education (RSE)?	16(22%)	33(46%)	23(32%)
Do you have adequate support from parents/carers to deliver LGBTQ+ inclusive Relationships and Sex Education (RSE)?	26(36%)	37(51%)	9(13%)
Are you personally supportive of LGBTQ+ inclusive Relationships and Sex Education (RSE)?	4(6%)	13(18%)	55(76%)

Table 2. Thematic framework categories and sub-categories.

Challenges	Suggestions
Teacher lack of confidence	Extra support for schools
Lack of resources/training	Enabling wider dialogue
Lack of support from other key stakeholders	A stronger 'steer' from government
Teachers not personally supportive	Fully embed work into a whole school approach
Concerns about gender ideology	Remove the TQ+ from LGBTQ+

Procedure

Teachers were recruited using the social media platform X (formerly Twitter), and through emails sent to the headteachers of schools in certain boroughs nationwide. The recruitment information and landing page of the survey stated that we were looking for teachers in England. The survey was open from January 2022 to July 2023. The landing page included information about the study. Participants were told that responses were anonymous and that they could cease involvement at any time by closing their browser. Participants were informed that the fully anonymous data would be made available in an open access data repository. They were also provided with details of appropriate organisations for resources and support in this area if they felt this would be valuable – either personally or professionally. Ethical approval for the study was granted from Manchester Metropolitan University on 1 December 2021 (Reference: 37329).

Data analysis

Data from the closed questions were analysed descriptively. The small number of respondents made it impossible to search for group differences, other than between primary and secondary school teachers. Thematic Framework Analysis was used to analyse the data from the open-ended questions (Gale et al. 2013). This approach sought to balance depth with breadth and was not aligned to any particular epistemological standpoint. The intent was to describe, summarise and inductively interpret surface level patterns in semantic content from the sample as a whole.

The following five stages of analysis were followed, as outlined by Ritchie and Spencer (1994): familiarisation (stage 1); identifying a framework (stage 2); indexing (stage 3); charting (stage 4); and mapping and interpretation (stage 5). The initial framework was created by the first author (CF), who then worked with the second author (MR) to review and refine it. While there was broad agreement on the categories present in the data, we worked together to refine category names. CF carried out the subsequent coding, with the coding then checked for accuracy by MR who agreed that the coding framework and subsequent codes accurately represented the data. An acronym is used for participants (Pt) as well as for primary schools (PS) and secondary schools (SS) to denote which participants the quotes come from, e.g. (PT1,PS).

Findings

The responses to the closed survey questions (Table 1) indicate variability in perceptions of having access to adequate resources and training, feeling confident, and receiving adequate support from their school and parents. When asked about being

personally supportive of LGBTQ+ inclusive RSE, 76% of participants indicated 'Yes, definitely', 18% 'Yes, to some extent', and only 4 (6%) indicated 'No, not at all'. When asked, 'How would you rate the quality of LGBTQ+ inclusive Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in your school?', 10 participants (14%) responded very poor, 13 (18%) poor, 19 (26%) satisfactory, 21 (29%) good (29%) and 9 (13%) very good. In response to the question, 'Do you receive support from an external organisation to deliver LGBTQ+ inclusive Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) – for example, co-delivery or external facilitators taking whole lessons?', of the 72 respondents, 11 responded yes (15%) and 61 (85%) no.

Among participants who indicated the quality of LGBTQ+ RSE provision was 'poor' or 'very poor', some teachers indicated that there was no universal approach, and practices could vary between one teacher to the next.

> . . . the education varies largely between teachers and classes. There is no universal approach of school leadership (Pt15,PS),
>
> There is no whole school approach and therefore the quality [of provision] would vary from class to class. (Pt38,PS)

Other participants indicated that what was delivered was very limited.

> don't think this is something we cover except in year 1 and that there are different families (Pt19,PS),
>
> Not enough. The children know so much more now than some teachers and we need to do better. (Pt50,PS)

Respondents who provided a 'satisfactory' response gave similar responses to some of those who indicated their provision was poor. For example, practices were described as limited and problems were noted with respect to teacher confidence and lack of training. There was mention of 'pockets of good practice' (Pt3,PS) and 'room for improvement' (Pt13,PS), as well as provision being at a very early stage of development.

> There are pockets of good practice in my school in certain year groups and certain classes. But, there isn't a whole school, consistent approach. Budget issues are preventing resources from being purchased additionally and training (Pt3,PS),
>
> There is some teaching but it is not fully integrated into the curriculum. It is dependent on each individual teacher (Pt28,SS),
>
> We follow a good scheme and are committed to inclusive RSE, however, we have inexperienced staff who are not always confident enough to challenge perceptions. (Pt69,PS)

The responses from participants who indicated that LGBTQ+ RSE provision in their school was 'good' or 'very good' were shorter and some were quite vague.

> 'Scheme includes LGBT texts' (Pt8,PS),
>
> 'It's in line with the curriculum' (Pt9,SS),
>
> 'Our curriculum meets all statutory requirements' (Pt32,PS),
>
> 'Resources are good' (Pt55,PS).

There were some examples of good practice, but again, the responses were quite short.

> 'It is thorough, supportive, and non-judgemental' (Pt12,SS),
>
> 'We are well resourced and have time in the curriculum' (Pt4,SS),
>
> 'Long term planning, resources, support through the curriculum and extra curricular' (Pt29, SS).

Mann-Whitney U Tests were used to test for differences based on sector – primary and secondary. Significant differences were found for responses to questions that asked about confidence and receiving adequate support from parents, with teachers working in secondary schools feeling more confident ($U = 792.50$, $p = .009$; mean ranks: 32.14 for primary and 44.70 for secondary) and reporting receiving more support from parents ($U = 757.50$, $p = .026$; mean ranks: 32.88 for primary and 43.30 for secondary). A Chi-Square analysis assessed associations between primary and secondary school teachers responses to the question about receiving support from an external organisation but the rest was not significant.

In further analysis of the qualitative data, we were guided by our interest in identifying challenges for delivery, and suggestions for improvement.

Challenges

Challenges identified included teacher lack of confidence, lack of resources and training, lack of support from other key stakeholders, teachers being not personally supportive, and teachers' concerns about gender ideology.

Teacher lack of confidence

As previously indicated, there were varying levels of confidence among teachers. There was a general lack of confidence on the part of some teachers.

> Not fully understanding. Not feeling confident. Not knowing if the content of the scheme we're using is even good enough (Pt5,PS),
>
> Often the children will discuss different genders or sexual preference titles I have never heard of (Pt34,PS),
>
> Only when I have a lack of knowledge as I am a white, heterosexual woman and I have to do my own learning (which I do!) (Pt48,PS),

One primary teacher indicated that this lack of confidence had an impact on delivery because it meant that responsibility for relationships education could fall on a small number of people.

Lack of resources/training

Participants' responses to questions about resources and training were quite short and served to reinforce the quantitative data showing that some teachers reported having limited resources and training, e.g. 'Lack of resources' (Pt18,PS; Pt21,SS; Pt52,SS), 'There is no money to buy LGBT+ books' (Pt27,PS), 'Lack of training' (Pt41,

SS; Pt42,PS), 'Up-to-date resources and references'(Pt44,SS). One primary teacher said,

> 'we've had no training on how to deliver it, and I know from personal experience, and from speaking with many colleagues, no one feels confident to deliver the lessons. (Pt5,PS)

Lack of support from other key stakeholders

Some teachers' responses pointed to perceived lack of support from parents.

> Some parents thinking that children are too young to understand what this truly means. They are happy to say a child has two mummies, but no more than that (Pt6,PS),
>
> Parents not accepting that LGBTQ+ relationships should be taught in primary schools (Pt11, PS),
>
> 'Concern about parental response'(Pt16,SS).

Other comments indicated concerns that these views then filtered down to children.

> 'Parents not agreeing and being homophobic. The children then copying that homophobic behaviour' (Pt39,PS),
>
> 'Inherited homophobic views by children from backgrounds that do not yet accept difference'(Pt62,PS).

Religion was cited as a factor that could influence parents' responses.

> Majority of children and parents are Muslim, so people are unsure of how it would go down if we did discuss LGBTQ+ more prominently (Pt70,PS),
>
> 'Parents for cultural and religious reasons' (Pt50,PS).

Working in a faith school was seen as a barrier to good quality provision.

> Working in a Catholic school, we have sometimes been told not to discuss this with the children as they are too young (Pt4,PS),
>
> Due to the school being a faith school, leadership are very cautious and need everything checked by the Rabbi (Pt38,PS),
>
> I work in a school with 80% Muslim children who have the serious belief that LGBTQ+ is haram. (Pt68,SS)

In addition, some teachers pointed to the lack of support from senior leaders.

> Trying to persuade the pastoral lead to engage with me/implement some ideas and these suggestions being rejected (Pt26,SS),
>
> 'LGBT+ education doesn't seem to be a priority from the head' (Pt27,PS).

This lack of support also extended to the wider community and government.

> Trolling online when we've even posted images of pride flags. This has made teachers nervous (Pt65,PS),
>
> Lack of clarity from statutory guidance', and 'The National Curriculum and statutory guidance is vague and so expectations of us as teachers is not clear. (Pt42,PS)

Teachers not personally supportive

Very short answers indicated that some teachers were not personally supportive of LGBTQ + inclusive RSE, again supporting the quantitative findings.

> Knowing that teachers in my school feel they have to, but privately share obscene views on LGBTQ+ on nights out (Pt36,PS),
>
> I think a lot of staff will be resistant to teaching this. Maybe because they don't think it's necessary to know this or because they don't know how to approach it (Pt27,PS),
>
> 'It doesn't help when most of the teachers are closet homophobes' (Pt6,PS).

Responses to the question that asked whether survey respondents were personally supportive reflected the answers to the more general question about teacher support, with both positive and negative views being expressed. The positive comments conveyed why LGBTQ+ inclusive RSE is important within schools.

> I am a Black Queer woman and it's crucial our students see diversity in both communities (Pt16,SS),
>
> It is important for children and young people to have the language and knowledge to communicate about their own sexuality and gender identity and that of others (Pt28,SS),
>
> It was not openly taught or talked about when I was in school. This made my journey challenging and I felt isolated. Nobody should feel this way. (Pt62,PS)

Only 6% of teachers indicated they were not personally supportive and 18% that they were supportive 'to some extent'. Additional comments suggested teachers teachers were supportive of teaching about LGB identities, but not trans and gender identities.

> 'I support LGB. I think Trans activism is really dangerous' (Pt2,PS),
>
> 'I have no time for gender identity at all' (Pt32,PS),

Concerns about gender ideology

Finally, some comments indicated worries about sex and gender being conflated, and others about making changes to the body an early age.

> The issue of conflating sex with gender and not wanting to confuse children or make them believe they can actually change sex. (Pt25,PS)
>
> 'Anything Trans related is hugely damaging and abject nonsense' (Pt2,PS),
>
> Lots of teachers are uncomfortable about teaching about gender identity because of the mounting concerns in schools about many young people, mainly girls, making permanent changes to their body at a young age (Pt12,SS),

Suggestions for improvement

Extra support for teachers/schools

Given teachers overall lack of confidence and the need for training and better resources, it is not surprising that many of the suggestions for improvement concerned the same issues.

> Money needs to be spent on staff training to keep people up-to-date, and money to buy inclusive resources. (Pt27,PS)

Some teachers asked for more practical kinds of advice.

> More practical advice for staff, wording, key terms, how to approach and ways of moving forwards etc' (Pt54,SS),

> Give people clear definitions, scripts on how to help staff who do not feel comfortable always and just being clear why people are part of the community. (Pt68,SS)

The quantitative data revealed that only a small number of the teacher respondents received support from external organisations. Greater involvement by external organisations was suggested by some.

> 'Better access to organisations who promote and raise the profile of LGBTQ+ rights' (Pt3,PS),

> 'Work with external providers to develop accredited courses to raise standards and trust' (Pt65,PS),

> Maybe external facilitators/people representing LGBTQ+ in school would help children who may be wondering about their own sexuality. (Pt20,PS)

Finally, a small number of comments suggested the need for specialist teaching support.

> 'Using subject specialists. People who aren't comfortable teaching RSE shouldn't be teaching it' (Pt64,SS).

Enabling wider dialogue

To address the issue of lack of support from key stakeholders and some teachers not being personally supportive, some participants suggested the need for greater dialogue and closer working together.

> 'Engage with relevant stakeholders' (Pt26,SS),

> Parents/carers need further education on what is being taught, so they understand that it is appropriate/remove misconceptions. (Pt62,PS)

A stronger 'steer' from government

A number of teachers wanted a stronger steer from government with a greater emphasis on the importance of embedding LGBTQ+ issues within the curriculum, the provision of teacher training, and specific guidance on how to include 'trans issues'.

> Education policy should make it more important within the curriculum, mandatory, and regularly update teacher training (Pt5,PS),

'Must be mandatory and taught properly during teacher training' (Pt61,PS),

'Government guidance on trans issues' (Pt67,SS).

Fully embed work in a whole school approach

Several suggestions were made about the need to embed concern for LGBTQ+ issues, life and identities across the curriculum and more broadly into the life of the school.

'Frequent discussions around the topic, cross-curricular. Not just a day or one-off lesson' (Pt28,SS),

More diversity in school assemblies, and displays and resources around school to reflect inclusive relationships (Pt3,PS),

Encourage schools to promote this type of education and to continue it throughout school, not just as an ad-hoc. (Pt41,SS)

Some respondents suggested,

'Start it early!' (Pt6,PS),

Teach it in nursery and reception more through exploring how families can be different, but that's OK and it's normal. (Pt39,PS)

Remove the TQ+ from LGBTQ+

In line with the comments made by a small minority of respondents, suggestions were to separate or remove TQ+ from LGBTQ+.

Make it clear that biological sex is real, immutable, and gender identity is an ideology and one that not everyone agrees with (Pt12,SS),

Firstly, you need to split LGBTQ+ into LGB & TQ+. There are little or no issues with LGB education. There are extremely serious issues with Trans indoctrination (Pt2,PS),

'Be clear that LGB has nothing to do with TQ+'(Pt21,SS).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to capture teachers' perceptions and experiences of delivering the RSE curriculum that came into effect in schools in England in September 2022. Since that time, there has been an increase in concern about the teaching RSE in general, as well as a growing anti-trans sentiment in society, and specifically in schools. Controversial government guidance for schools on gender questioning children remains under review, and has the potential to undermine children's rights and place trans and non-binary students at greater risk of harm.

As noted, good quality RSE that is LGBTQ+ inclusive is important for a number of reasons. The responses of teachers in this study show that there is considerable variability in the delivery of LGBTQ+ inclusive content in England, with teachers expressing lack of confidence, the desire for more training and resources, and support from external organisations. These findings are perhaps not surprising given that teachers still express a lack of confidence about delivering RSE in general (Stevens 2023), aligning with previous

research findings by Carlile (2020). Given the ongoing teacher retention crisis in England with figures from 2022–23 indicating that 39,971 (8.8%) state-funded teachers left the profession for reasons other than retirement (Department for Education DfE 2023b), it is clear that schools are in England under serious stress and need greater support from government in potentially sensitive areas such as LGBTQ+ inclusive RSE.

There is some evidence to show that this lack of confidence may be worse in primary schools. Primary school teacher respondents reported a greater lack of support from parents, compared to secondary-school teachers. This is perhaps to be expected given claims that current guidance for primary schools is more open-ended, and supports other research showing the challenges to be faced in delivering LGBTQ+ inclusive RSE in primary schools, with notions of childhood innocence being used to restrict the work engaged with (Atkinson et al. 2022). However, there is clear evidence to suggest that children are able to articulate ideas about gender from a very early age (Neary 2023), and it has been argued that early years' education is a crucial place for discussions to begin (Warin and Price 2020).

Other researchers have pointed to the influence of key stakeholders such as parents and representatives of faith communities (e.g. Carlile 2020) who can make teachers fearful about doing the wrong thing. The backlash seen against some schools, particularly primary schools that have aimed to introduce a fully inclusive agenda, shows that these fears are very real. One of the suggestions from teachers in this study was to facilitate wider dialogue with stakeholders such as parents and faith communities. Although, as highlighted by DePalma and Jennett's (2010) early work, this may not always easy, and in some cases can lead to resistance. Thus, there are major benefits to alleviating fears and broadening the base of support for sex, gender and sexuality inclusive work in schools.

In the absence of a stronger steer from government, and clearer leadership in schools it is difficult to see how teachers can be better supported to deliver LGBTQ+ inclusive RSE within this UK policy context. As noted by Glazzard and Stones (2021), in their analysis of the new RSE guidance, a lack of LGBTQ+ content could lead to an increase in mental health problems and bullying. In addition, the proposed new policies could make schools even more unsafe for trans students; this moral panic has been seen elsewhere, for example, in Canada, driven in part by a 'parental rights' discourse (Morgan and Taylor 2019).

There is evidence of growing anti-trans sentiment in a recent British Social Attitudes Survey (Montagu and Maplethorpe 2024). In parallel, there has been an increase in hate crimes against trans people (Stonewall 2023). Our findings show that some of the teachers who completed the survey are not supportive of trans rights, similar to the findings in Martino, Omercajic, and Kassen (2022) survey of teachers in Canada, and this may be a difficult issue to address through further training alone (Payne and Smith 2010). Other research has shown that although many teachers are accepting of trans students, they are still unsure how best to support them (Taylor et al. 2016).

As well as the suggestions for better training and resources, and for the need to engage with wider stakeholders, several teachers in our survey recommended a whole-school approach, with a focus on LGBTQ+ issues across and beyond the curriculum and starting early. This is in line with good practice guidance such as that provided by Dellenty (2019) and Barnes and Carlile (2018) that places emphasis on a whole-school approach, which extends to what can be done beyond the classroom, and which involves teaching and

non-teaching staff. Ultimately, there is a need to tackle the systemic forces contributing to cis- and hetero-normativity within schools and to avoid superficial and patchy representation of the LGBTQ+ community; only then will RSE be supported to be fully LGBTQ+ inclusive.

Limitations

Although efforts were made to enhance recruitment by reaching out to schools nationwide across England, the teacher sample in this study was small and self-selected. A range of views were expressed, however, providing some indication of the diversity of perspectives among teachers. However, the findings cannot be generalised and must be treated with caution given that those with strong views may be more tempted to volunteer to participate in surveys of this kind. Given recent concerns about disingenuous participants sabotaging research on topics they disagree with (Dietzel, Vipond, and Maitland 2025) it is possible that some of our respondents were not actually teachers and/or the sample was skewed and unrepresentative. Despite this, these findings align with those from similar research in Canada by Martino, Omercajic, and Kassen (2022). It is also important to note that many of the teachers in this study were personally supportive (76% 'definitely'), some saying that this was because they either identified as LGBTQ+ or had family members who were.

Implications

The findings from this study point to the urgent need to address teacher lack of confidence in delivering LGBTQ+ inclusive RSE, with the issue being particularly acute in primary schools. Given an ongoing crisis of teacher retention (Department for Education DfE 2023b) and the consequences for children of not making RSE fully LGBTQ+ inclusive, we hope that our findings highlight what teachers need. Teachers clearly want more training, better resources, and support from school leadership, the government, and external organisations. In addition, they recognise the need to work in partnership with parents and other key stakeholders. Much can be learned from recent successful efforts to empower whole school communities towards LGBTQ+ inclusion through initiatives such as Gender Equality Matters in Ireland (Keating and Baker 2024), and similar programmes elsewhere.

Notes

1. The umbrella term LGBTQ+ includes a range of identities including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning people. The + (plus) donates various identities such as intersex, asexual, pansexual, demisexual, gender fluid, non-binary and many more. We recognise that some people experience the plus as a disconnect and erasure within LGBTQ + communities and this is not our intention when using the term LGBTQ+. For consistency, we use the term LGBTQ+ throughout, unless this term differs to the terms used by the authors of the studies or policy documents we cite.
2. We use the acronym RSE in this paper to refer to Relationships and Sex Education for consistency, although it is important to acknowledge that Relationships and Sex Education is compulsory in secondary schools only, with Relationships Education being compulsory in primary schools. When citing studies and policy documents, we retain the terminology used by the authors.

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ORCID

Claire L. Fox http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4329-4056

Data availability statement

Data in support of this publication are openly available from Manchester Metropolitan University's research repository: https://doi.org/10.23634/MMU.00634920

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