

'They believe this'

Taking pupils' religious backgrounds into account in Relationships and Sex Education

Executive Summary

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Introduction

Since September 2020 Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) has been compulsory for all pupils receiving secondary education in England. Statutory guidance on RSE, published in 2019, states that the religious background of all pupils must be taken into account when planning teaching. It also states that schools may teach about faith perspectives on these issues and that pupils should be well informed about the full range of perspectives within the law.

This research aims to explore young people's experiences of, and views on, the place of religion in RSE and how they feel it might better take account of religious faith in the future. The study focuses particularly, but not exclusively, on young Christians and Muslims, reflecting the focus of Faiths Against Child Sexual Exploitation (FACES), the organisation that commissioned the research.

Methodology

This small-scale exploratory study took a 'mixed-methods' approach, with young people's views being elicited via a survey and focus groups.

The design of the online survey was informed by the findings of an initial literature review and explored young people's experiences of RSE within secondary school, and how this aspect of the curriculum can better take account of the religious faith backgrounds of pupils.

The survey was completed by 157 15-19 year olds, who between them reflected on their experiences of RSE across a total of 29 different secondary schools in England.

It was completed by those from religious backgrounds (55% self-identified as Muslim and 24% as Christian) and also those who identified as having no religion.

Following the survey, four online focus groups were held with a total of 16 Muslim and Christian young people aged 18-21, exploring their views on RSE within secondary schools and how it could be more faith sensitive.

As a small-scale exploratory study, the findings speak only of those who participated and should not be taken as representative of the wider population. They do however offer a range of insights that can helpfully inform the development of RSE for young people of faith.

The experience of having religious faith at secondary school

RSE takes place within the wider social context of secondary school, so it is important to understand how young people with religious faith experience this, including their perceptions of how others view them, and their religion.

Most young people we surveyed (whether religious or not) reported that staff and pupils at secondary school respected pupils' religious beliefs all or most of the time.

Nevertheless, when asked about positive or negative assumptions made about their religion, young people in our focus groups identified a range of predominantly negative assumptions or stereotypes made about those of religious faith by peers and sometimes by teachers. These included perceptions that religious pupils are socially conservative, at risk of certain kinds of oppression because of religious beliefs or a risk to others through religious extremism.

Muslim young people in our focus groups reported particularly negative experiences of these stereotypes. Some of these existed at the intersection of religion and gender, for example perceptions that Muslim young women who wear a hijab are socially reserved and/or oppressed by males.

Some young people in our focus groups described being seen primarily through the lens of these assumptions about religion, rather than as individuals, and some reported feeling isolated or judged by peers and/or teachers as a result. Similarly, others reported being expected to speak for, or represent, their religion, which they felt precluded them from having the freedom to come to their own views.

Our focus groups elicited deeper reflection on the impact of negative assumptions about religion, which may be partly explained by our research methodology: the survey was mostly completed by 15 and 16 year olds, while the focus groups comprised 18-21 year olds who, overall, had more space and capacity to reflect critically on their previous experience.

How young people of religious faith experience RSE

For many of the young people of religious faith taking part in this research, RSE involved managing some measure of conflict between the curriculum, the social norms of 'mainstream' teenage culture and religious teaching, although not everyone perceived or experienced this conflict to the same degree or found it equally challenging.

The main social norms identified by participants in the study as potentially conflicting with religious belief or practice were that teenagers have sex and want to have sex, and that they will be in romantic relationships while at school. Some also identified a conflict between how same-sex relationships were viewed within RSE and religious teachings.

When presented with a list of RSE topics, 72% of young people we surveyed said they had been taught about 'sexual consent', while only 39% said they had been taught about 'the choice not to have sex'.

The gap between these norms and religious teaching was reported by some young people to be uncomfortable, particularly when it is drawn attention to within RSE.

Some young people in the focus groups contrasted the explicit or implicit communication of what is socially 'normal' and desirable (including having sex as a teenager and being in romantic relationships) with information that they described as more 'neutral' and which they preferred (i.e. factual, practical, or medical).

Our survey also highlighted the reality that, while religious teaching on sex and relationships is complex, so is young people's relationship, and adherence, to that teaching.

Experiences of religious faith being taken into account within RSE

Young people in this research reported diverse experiences in recalling how and whether religion came up in the context of RSE, and whether RSE took account of pupils' religious background.

Almost an equal number of the 146 young people responding said, 'yes', religion had come up in context of RSE at school (39%) and 'no', it had not (37%). The rest did not know.

Only 39% of survey respondents had a clear recollection of the topic of religion ever coming up in the context of RSE. Nevertheless, 79% of those of those with religious faith felt that those teaching RSE had (34%) or had somewhat (45%) taken their religious beliefs into account. Just over a fifth (21%) reported that their religion had not been taken into account.

Young people in our focus groups also described different experiences of how religion was – or was not – present in RSE, including religion being ignored, being reduced in its complexity and or being exposed, by being discussed directly with pupils of religious faith in front of their peers.

There was no clear consensus amongst those completing the survey about what it might mean for teachers to take account of religious belief. For example, those who felt that teachers had, or had only somewhat, taken religious belief into account both described teachers being mindful and respectful of diversity, suggesting that this is not a clear delineator of what it means to take account of religious belief.

Just over a quarter of those surveyed (28%) reported that assumptions had been made about their own or other people's religion by those teaching RSE, for example that young people of religious faith are not allowed to engage in pre-marital sex.

Young people's views on taking religious faith into account in RSE

87% of our young respondents wanted RSE to take religious beliefs and background into account, with most reporting that this would be a route to greater understanding, tolerance, respect and inclusivity amongst different social groups.

Survey respondents felt that this would leave pupils of all faiths and none better informed about religion, while the primary benefit for those of faith would be less discomfort in the context of RSE.

While most young people wanted RSE to take account of religious faith, there were concerns about the potential outworking of this with participants communicating that it needed to be done well. Some participants, in both the focus groups and the survey, had concerns that talking about religion could expose and exacerbate conflict between social groups, leading to further stigmatisation of those from faith backgrounds. There were also concerns that taking account of religion could lead to young people receiving different teaching in relation to RSE, on the basis of their religion.

A number of tensions exist for young people in trying to articulate what it means to take their religious beliefs into account. This includes a tension between wanting to hear the nuance of their own religion acknowledged by teachers who understand it well, and a desire for all pupils to have access to the same learning experience.

Some young people had experienced being taught about their own religion in ways they found alienating and confusing. They were therefore concerned that if RSE educators drew on overly simplistic ideas of religion, young people of faith might feel less, rather than more, included.

There was an overarching feeling that school was unlikely to be the context where the nuances of someone's faith were recognised explicitly, or where pupils of religious faith would receive high quality guidance or teaching in relation to faith, sex and relationships.

Delivering faith-sensitive RSE

There was a clear preference amongst survey respondents for RSE to be taught by a specialist from outside the school, rather than a teacher, reflecting the findings of our literature review.

For those surveyed, it was more important that an educator is knowledgeable and comfortable talking about sex than that they share the same cultural or religious background as pupils, though the latter were valued more by young people with religious faith, than those of no faith.

Young people in our focus groups felt that for RSE to take account of religious faith, educators needed to be open, respectful, non-judgemental, conscious of diversity, independent of the school and trained or experienced specialists.

A preference emerged in the focus groups for RSE to acknowledge the diversity of possible choices when it comes to sex and relationships, without necessarily labelling these choices as being on the basis of religion or 'exposing' individual pupils in class discussions because of their religious identity.

Concluding reflections

RSE can be uncomfortable for young people of religious faith, especially where religious teaching and practice is in conflict with what young people described as 'mainstream' social norms or aspects of the curriculum itself. Furthermore, where assumptions or generalisations are made about religious beliefs, young people of religious faith can feel isolated, exposed and judged by their peers, and sometimes by teachers too.

Despite these challenges, the majority of young people in our study (87%) wanted RSE to take religion into account. We were told that, if this was done well, young people of all religions and none would deepen their understanding of one another, thereby increasing their respect for diverse beliefs and practices.

However, some participants expressed concern that if those teaching RSE attempt to represent 'distinctive faith perspectives' without sufficient understanding or sensitivity, young people of religious faith could feel more alienated and exposed than if religion is not referenced at all. There was also concern that simplistic approaches to religion and RSE could end up reproducing

unhelpful stereotypes that do not acknowledge the complexity of pupils' lived experiences.

Our findings suggest that young people do not realistically expect RSE educators to be experts in various religions. Instead, they want individuals who are sensitised to diverse experiences, willing to listen and who, as far as possible, don't make assumptions about young people on the basis of religion, or anything else.

The contributions of participants in this exploratory study suggests therefore that faith-sensitive RSE should:

- Consider the religious faith of pupils, but in a sensitive and nuanced manner
- Avoid exposing or alienating those of faith in what may be an uncomfortable context for them
- Acknowledge diversity of all kinds, and validate different personal choices, not only those related to religion