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Relationships and Sex Education teaching in English secondary schools and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school education resulted in class disruption and fragmented online teaching. Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) was made compulsory in England in 2020, but the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on RSE is unclear. In this study, 16 teachers working in English secondary schools participated in online qualitative, semi-structured interviews on their experiences teaching RSE. Themes were identified using deductive and inductive codes as part of a thematic analysis process. Participants taught children aged 11–18 in independent, comprehensive and academy schools. Teachers found it difficult to deliver high quality RSE lessons because of concern that available material would be inappropriate for virtual delivery. Fragmentation of teaching also limited the development of pupil-teacher rapport, highlighted as key to effective RSE. Extra-curricular initiatives were also disrupted by the pandemic, persisting even after face-to-face teaching returned as schools focused on 'core' academic subjects. RSE teaching was seriously impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and although face to face teaching has resumed, healthy peer-on-peer relationships remain impacted by fragmented teaching. Ongoing prioritisation of RSE, and the appropriate use of digital resources, will support young people moving forward and help prepare for any future disruption of to face-to-face teaching.

Introduction

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in March 2020 schools in England were instructed to close for the majority of students, with only the children of keyworkers and the most vulnerable able to attend (Roberts and Danechi 2021). This forced teaching to move online, which caused significant disruption to teachers and students alike. Table 1 provides further detail on the timing of national lockdowns in England (Institute for Government Analysis n.d.). COVID-19 also impacted on teaching in schools because many teachers and students contracted the infection, which caused periods of illness-related absence and isolation, further fragmenting educational delivery (Ofqual 2021). National examinations were cancelled in 2020 and 2021 due to teaching disruption, which

Table 1. National COVID-19 associated lock-downs in England.

Start of lockdown	End of lockdown
26th March 2020	1st June 2020
5th November 2020	2nd December 2020[a]
6th January 2021	8th March 2021

[a]Face to face teaching was unable to resume at the end of this lockdown, and schools did not fully reopen until 8th March 2021.

impacted several year groups of students (Roberts and Danechi 2022). Although schools had by March 2021 returned to full face to face teaching (Institute for Government Analysis, 2022), they were required to prioritise core academic subjects for national examinations. Both at the time and in retrospect, COVID-19 negatively impacted education, with learning loss (Ofqual 2021) and negative impacts for both students (Gazmararian et al. 2021) and staff wellbeing (Maitland and Glazzard 2022).

Relationships and Sex Education became compulsory at secondary school level in all English schools in England in September 2020, with detailed guidance published by the Department for Education (DfE) (Department for Education 2018). The new RSE curriculum aims for all schools to provide education that will support students to make informed decisions about their 'wellbeing, health and relationships' (Department for Education 2018). Although there is no minimum required teaching time, the curriculum is expected to be broad and ensure that sufficient time is provided for information to be communicated clearly. Schools must provide context for pupils to understand how to use RSE information in real-life scenarios (Department for Education 2018). The DfE RSE guidance requires RSE to take into consideration a variety of backgrounds and beliefs of pupils, whilst providing non-judgemental and age-appropriate teaching to support young people to make informed decisions about their sexual relationships and wider wellbeing. This document provides specific guidance on how topics such as intimate and sexual relationships, including sexual health, should be covered, and highlights the importance of providing information about where to access Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) services (Department for Education 2018).

High quality RSE teaching in a school setting can impact positively on physical health outcomes and young people's behaviour and attitudes: young people who have received comprehensive RSE are more likely to practise safe sex and seek help if they are concerned about sexual abuse, and RSE can boost gender equitable attitudes amongst students (Sex Education Forum 2022a). Unplanned pregnancy is less common among those who received sex education at school (Wellings et al. 2013). However, challenges to teaching RSE, present before the COVID-19 pandemic, include lack of confidence teaching RSE (NASUWT, and NSPCC 2022), lack of RSE resources and training (NASUWT, and NSPCC 2022), and lack of parental and student engagement outside of the classroom (Sex Education Forum 2022a). Extracurricular RSE schemes encourage a holistic consideration of key RSE learning objectives by providing additional time and support to those who need it. Parental engagement and online resources are recommended by the Department for Education (Department for Education 2018), and other initiatives such as sexual health

clinic outreach (Salmon and Ingram 2008) and condom distribution schemes (Public Health England 2017) can improve access to services.

Against this background, this study explores the impact of COVID-19 on how RSE was delivered from the initial stages of the pandemic to re-introduction of full face to face teaching, as well as how student interaction and relationship formation was affected, making suggestions for mitigation against potential future disruption. The specific objectives of the study were to

- explore how COVID-19 impacted the delivery of Relationships and Sex Education in secondary schools in England
- explore how COVID-19 impacted student behaviour and peer-on-peer relationship formation

Methods

Recruitment and sampling

We recruited teachers in English secondary schools who had varying levels of involvement in RSE teaching and invited them to participate in interviews. Participants were recruited in several different ways. A mixture of purposive and snowball sampling was used, with those known to be involved in RSE teaching in a variety of secondary schools directly contacted via email and invited to participate in the study. A call for participants with RSE teaching experience in English secondary schools was issued on the social media platforms Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, and snowball sampling provided additional participants. Heterogeneous sampling enabled identification of relevant participants; the criteria used were years of teaching, role within RSE teaching, location of school and type of school taught in. This ensured representation of a variety of locations and school types so that a variety range of teaching experiences could be explored through interview, while ensuring that all interviewees had suitable prior experience of RSE education. As shown in Table 2, participants worked in a variety of different school environments, including state comprehensive and academy schools, as well as independent day and boarding schools. Faith and Special Educational Needs (SEN) schools were also sampled to provide diversity of context in relation to RSE teaching experiences. A detailed participant information sheet, including an explanation of confidentiality, and a consent form were provided to participants prior to enrolment.

Data collection

A topic guide was developed for use in the interviews and was drafted following a review of the literature surrounding RSE. It was refined and piloted with a former secondary school educator to ensure the questions were clear and relevant. Further minor refinements occurred following the first three interviews, as certain questions seemed more pertinent, and others appeared less important to the aims of the study.

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted online between October 2021 and April 2022 using Microsoft Teams software. All interviews were conducted by the first author and lasted 45–90 minutes. This enabled teachers to reflect on their experience of teaching during lockdowns, as well as the resumption of face-to-face teaching. Teams software was

Table 2. Summary of participant characteristics.

School type	Urban or rural location	Role within RSE	Years of teaching experience	Additional information
Independent[a] day	Urban	Teaches RSE, former head of RSE	10	
Independent day	Urban	Joint head of RSE	>10	
Independent day	Urban	Head of RSE	13	
Independent day	Urban	Head of RSE	20	
Independent day	Urban	Deputy head, teaches RSE	29	
Independent boarding	Rural	Teaches RSE	7	Faith school
State[b] comprehensive[c]	Suburban	Head of RSE	15	
State comprehensive	Urban	Head of RSE	1	Special educational needs
State comprehensive	Urban	Head of RSE for key stages ¾	5	
State comprehensive	Urban	Teaches RSE	5	
State comprehensive	Urban	Teaches RSE	9	Faith school
State comprehensive	Urban	Part of RSE planning and teaching team	11	
State comprehensive	Suburban	Teaches RSE	16	
State academy[d]	Suburban	Head of RSE	8	
State academy	Suburban	Head of RSE	10	
State academy	Rural	Head of RSE	35	

[a]Independent schools, also known as 'private schools', charge fees to attend and do not have to follow the National Curriculum in England, although they must be government registered and regularly inspected.
[b]All state schools are free to attend.
[c]State comprehensive schools are funded by the local authority and must follow the National Curriculum.
[d]State academy schools are funded by the government and run by academy trusts, which are able to alter their curriculum.

used, with participants' permission, to record the interviews and provide an auto-generated transcript which was finalised by listening to the recording and correcting any errors. Semi-structured interviews, with use of a topic guide, allowed discussion of teachers' attitudes towards RSE; barriers and facilitators of providing comprehensive RSE; and understanding how a digital resource can be used to support teaching. The semi-structured interview method allowed open-ended discussion of these topics, with the flexibility to explore areas of particular interest in each interview, whilst maintaining a overall plan to ensure key topics were covered. COVID-19 proved to be an important theme within these interviews, despite not featuring as a specific topic within the discussion guide.

Data analysis

Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis was used to analyse the transcribed interviews (Clarke and Braun 2017). The model requires an iterative and reflexive approach, with the development of codes using both deductive and inductive analysis. Although some existing concepts guided the initial analysis, no set number of codes was decided upon. The iteration between deductive and inductive analytic methods, in addition to repeated review of each manuscript, guided the development of the coding framework.

Once an initial coding structure had been developed, it was reviewed by the authors and a wider advisory group. The initial framework was then combined into a detailed thematic mapping, with a particular focus on themes and sub-themes relating to COVID-19 and RSE. NVIVO software was used to support the analysis. The analysis was under-pinned by constructivist principles, in line with the view that interviewees' experiences of RSE education will be context-dependent and influenced by many factors (Given 2008).

Their interpretation of the topics discussed will also be influenced by the interaction between the interviewee and the participant (Bourke 2014).

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the UCL Research Ethics Committee (number: 19943/001).

Results

16 teachers were interviewed. Teachers were variously involved in RSE delivery, and had a range of teaching experience. The interviewees taught at a variety of schools in locations across England, including in faith and special educational needs schools. Table 2 provides a summary of participant characteristics. Interviewees worked in a variety of schools, but did not express any feelings of relative advantage or disadvantage based on the type of institution that they worked at, with the themes below being discussed in both independent and state run schools.

Challenges adapting RSE lessons to virtual platforms

Concerns about whether particular topics were suitable to teach online

Several factors limited the delivery of comprehensive RSE through online teaching. Teachers were particularly concerned that some RSE material would not be appropriate to share online. Other people might potentially be in the same room at home, and students may not feel able to fully interact with the lesson:

> It's sensitive with too many people in the background who might be having questions about, you know, 'What's the teacher talking about?' . . . The kids don't feel they can respond or ask the questions when there might be people in the background . . . - Female, geography teacher, independent day school

Teachers explained that safeguarding[1] concerns were important when teaching RSE, and the necessary protections were less likely to be met by online delivery[1]. Due to the perceived sensitive nature of these topics, interviewees felt that classes should be primarily taught in a face-to-face setting where students can be appropriately supported.

Difficulty engaging students with online material

Teachers said that pupils engaged less well with online RSE lessons, in part because of the loss of group interactivity. Participants who did provide some online RSE teaching felt that it did not deliver the same level of engagement as face-to-face teaching:

> We've had a couple of Teams meetings and things like that where . . . we've had guest speakers. But again, these are only so useful, and they only have so much impact . . . - Male, religious education teacher, state academy

Fragmentation of teaching

The impact of COVID-19 on RSE delivery continued after face-to-face teaching resumed. Teachers found arranging external speakers to teach specific RSE topics more difficult because of ongoing travel restrictions and lockdowns, particularly as 'all of a sudden the

rules slightly changed and then guests were no longer allowed' (Male, religious education, state academy).

Participants explained that having a good rapport between teachers and pupils was an important aspect of successful RSE. New restrictions were often introduced at short notice and teachers said the fragmentation caused by these restrictions impacted on the ability to form good teacher-student relationships:

> Good sex education normally comes towards the end of the year, understandably, 'cause they're trying to get you to have a good rapport with your class before ... I haven't had that in a while, because of being interrupted by like online teaching and stuff. - Female, science teacher, comprehensive school

RSE support programmes side-lined due to COVID-19

Many teachers emphasised the importance of adopting a holistic approach to RSE. In addition to the lessons themselves, associated support and pastoral input ensured that students can take the information provided in lessons and apply it practically. Examples given of a holistic approach included having a school nurse presence, visits from local SRH clinics, and strong school-wide pastoral support networks.

Contraceptive provision sidelined

Participants explained that initiatives set up to complement RSE teaching were not prioritised during the COVID-19 pandemic. One teacher discussed the C-Card scheme, which enabled pupils to access free condoms from registered teachers and school nurses. However, under the impact of COVID-19, extra-curricular activities such as these were 'not really at the forefront of people's minds' (Female, RSE lead, independent day school). There may have been several reasons why programmes such as this were not prioritised during COVID-19, with competing academic priorities and the cost of provision being among them.

Parental support sidelined

Teachers also highlighted the importance of parental engagement in supporting RSE education. Many felt that parental engagement would support parents to continue the conversations that were started in RSE lessons and spread responsibility to reduce the burden on schools. However, parental support sessions were also affected by the COVID-19 pandemic:

> We have a loose formed parent programme at the moment, but COVID obviously ruined everything, and it was very *ad hoc* ... - Male, geography teacher, independent day school

Impact of catching up on 'core' learning after the resumption of face-to-face teaching

Since returning to classroom-based teaching, teachers reported that there had been more of a focus on ensuring that students caught up on traditional academic subjects. Senior managers were often focused on a return to pre-pandemic academic standards, which limited the amount of classroom/planning time, as well as budget, that could be dedicated to programmes such as RSE:

> Obviously, the pressures since then are all about catching up . . . on the academic stuff [which] has pushed that [RSE] out again a little bit as well. . . I can't see there being any chance of less academic time and more time for RSE, given this year of exams is the first exams they've done for three years . . . - Female, languages teacher, comprehensive school

Interviewees explained that, although RSE was now compulsory, it was often not viewed as in the same way that examined subjects are, and may be sacrificed when faced with other priorities. Some teachers described senior management as being supportive, at least in principle, of RSE delivery, but space within timetables was difficult to find. For example, although some teachers were able to provide limited RSE catch-up sessions, these were expected to be delivered outside of timetabled hours, such as during the lunch break.

Beyond the academic pressures and importance of preparing students for the return of examinations, some interviewees also discussed how COVID-19 had worsened staff shortages; one teacher explained that 'other schools are really struggling just to survive on a day-to-day basis, covering teachers with COVID-19' (Female, RSE lead, independent day school), which impacted on the ability to engage with RSE teaching and support.

Changes in student behaviour and relationship development since returning to face-to-face teaching

Teachers explained that the fragmentation of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic had had a wider impact on the social development of students, particularly those in the early years of secondary school. Teachers said that the final years of primary school provide important experiences interacting with other students before moving to a secondary school as the youngest year group:

> They missed those two really vital years of primary where you're the mature, responsible ones who are meant to be the role models and they had so little of that time actually in school that they're just a bit overwhelmed by secondary [school] - Female, science teacher, comprehensive school

Interviewees explained that the loss of social interaction time with peers was likely to impact on how students responded to topics in the RSE curriculum. Behavioural changes noted included a lack of insight into managing potential minor conflicts and understanding when to step back from situations in order to maintain a healthy peer-to-peer relationship:

> The year 7s are so impacted by COVID, you can just see it the most of any year group. They're really bad at forming relationships with each other and maintaining friendships . . . - Female, science teacher, comprehensive school

These changes in behaviour likely impact on students' engagement with central RSE topics such as consent and healthy relationship formation, both of which require an understanding of positive and negative interpersonal interactions. If not adequately supported to develop the necessary social skills, children's future relationships risk being negatively impacted.

Discussion

Overall, our study demonstrates something of the serious impact on RSE caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers found that online sessions in their current form could not provide the engaging and safe space for RSE work that can be provided face-to-face. The lockdown-associated fragmentation of teaching also impacted the student-teacher relationship, which teachers said was particularly important for effective RSE teaching.

Beyond this, both RSE lessons and support programmes were de-prioritised when, after lockdown, schools' focus shifted to maintaining 'core' academic outputs and RSE was side-lined. Lockdowns and the shift to online learning also impacted peer-to-peer relationship development, particularly for students at key progression stages, such as between primary and secondary school. International pandemic preparedness programmes report that a future pandemic is highly likely (J. Smith 2021), caused either by a related Coronavirus or another pathogen, which may result in further mass school closures. Understanding the teaching obstacles created by the COVID-19 pandemic can therefore mitigate against the learning loss associated with a future pandemic-associated lockdown.

RSE was disrupted by a major change in the allocation of resources as a consequence of the pandemic (Heyes 2021). Young people felt their RSE was significantly impacted by COVID-19, with a Sex Education Forum survey of 16–17-year-olds in 2021 finding that 49% reported receiving no RSE teaching at all during COVID-19 related lockdowns, and only 1 in 9 described there being an increase in RSE education (Sex Education Forum 2022b). Concern about online sessions and focus on competing priorities are likely to have been key drivers in this national reduction in RSE teaching. The re-introduction of GCSE examinations following a prolonged period of disrupted learning placed additional pressure on schools to uphold academic standards. This pressure was felt by senior management teams and teachers. Parents of students preparing for GCSEs or A-Level exams were anxious about their child's academic progress during the pandemic (Booth et al. 2021), and this too may have influenced the catch up process to focus more heavily on examined subjects.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the transition from primary to secondary school (Heyes 2021), a period that is critical for developing healthy relationship skills. Interviewees discussed how students had been unable to gain a full experience of relationship formation at primary level before moving into an often larger secondary school, in which they were the youngest pupils in the school. This appears to have impacted on how some pupils managed conflict and regulated their interactions, which must be considered when discussing key aspects of RSE, including consent and healthy relationships.

There is evidence that inequalities already present between state and independent schools were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, although this was not expressed by our interviewees. Independent schools were able to arrange live lockdown lessons more rapidly and provide better ongoing teacher support than state schools, particularly those with more disadvantaged intakes (Anders 2022). This is likely to have related to the differential access to IT equipment, both that already available at home for students and that provided by schools. Educational catch up efforts were also more effective at independent schools (Anders 2022). Independent schools may have been able to adapt

more rapidly to online lessons but concerns regarding the appropriateness of remotely delivered RSE remain as well as the low priority given to RSE upon resumption of face-to-face teaching, which was described in both state and independently run schools.

The Department for Education in England provided a 'catch-up' programme with funding to state schools to support educational recovery post COVID-19 (Department for Education 2020). However, the programme made no mention of RSE, and concerns were raised that provision was insufficient to meet the needs of schools more generally (Education Committee 2022), including wider engagement and emotional support of pupils (National Foundation for Educational Research 2021). Additionally, independent mainstream schools did not qualify for any funding through this programme. Interviewees identified competing academic interests as a factor limiting high quality RSE provision after face-to-face teaching has resumed. In keeping with this, a recent survey of English secondary school students demonstrated that the majority noted a decrease or complete cessation of their Relationships and Sex Education during the COVID-19 pandemic (Sex Education Forum 2022b).

Difficulties translating existing lessons into a virtual form impacted RSE provision. Interviewees expressed concern about delivering 'sensitive' RSE topics online, and previous research has shown that the learning experience can be compromised online when compared with face-to-face teaching, and online assessments may be less robust. Additionally, the loss of peer and teacher interaction during online sessions can impact psychological well-being and therefore the effectiveness of such teaching (Gazmararian et al. 2021; Tang 2022). Lack of access to appropriate IT devices (e.g. laptops, tablets and associated technology) has been highlighted as a cause of significant learning loss for certain pupils, particularly those already experiencing disadvantage (Education Committee 2022).

Whilst there are serious drawbacks to consider with online learning for RSE, there are also potential opportunities for educational reform arising from the pandemic. Digital spaces are becoming preferred sources of information for young people to find out about sexual and reproductive health (Paul, Thompson, and Gupta Kishor 2020), and utilising digital teaching tools can more effectively engage young people (UNESCO 2022). Interventions require targeted programmes, which are tailored to the student and teaching environment, and should provide an interactive learning opportunity. Pedagogy-driven digital tools, such as digital games employing the Four-Dimensional Framework of Learning (Arnab et al. 2013), can move beyond didactic teaching methods to support critical engagement with concepts and ideas, which is of particular importance in RSE teachings. Practical changes could include a combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning to minimise the impact of pupil absence and provide flexibility for students and teachers alike (Timmons et al. 2021). Interactive digital interventions can also be used in conjunction with face-to-face teaching to improve sexual health knowledge (Cortese and Lustria 2012), self-efficacy (Bailey et al. 2015) and sexual behaviour amongst young people (C. Smith et al. 2014).

Digital interventions in school settings can also provide effective in-lesson and out-of-classroom learning. Short tailored web-based messages about well-being and safer sex, delivered to secondary school students in the Netherlands, have been shown to improve condom use (Bannink et al. 2014). An online activity programme for US high school students, with interactive images and text, improved sexual health knowledge and motivation to use condoms (Roberto et al. 2007). However, financial incentives were provided to encourage engagement with the extra-curricular activity, which

would not be feasible or appropriate for wide scale school-based interventions. Importantly, digital tools must be adapted for use in different settings and with different cohorts of students; a combination of classroom-based teaching with age and culturally adapted digital elements can maximise the benefit of a variety of teaching methods (UNESCO 2022).

Digital interventions can also support future parental engagement with RSE; online videos and specific parent-teenager exercises, used with the parents of children in UK secondary schools, reduced perceived embarrassment and encouraged parents to talk about SRH with their children (Aventin et al. 2020). These and similar interventions can provide tailored and engaging age-appropriate learning, both within lesson time and as extracurricular support to both students and parents. This could enable a more comprehensive engagement with RSE topics to support future health and wellbeing, as well as providing a flexible delivery model to reduce learning loss associated with future face to face school disruption. However, how young people access information online is rapidly evolving, with many now using social media to gain SRH knowledge (Ofsted 2021), and any interactive digital interventions must adapt accordingly.

The return to classroom teaching provides an opportunity to ensure that curricula and resources are relevant and responsive (Cahapay 2020). As schools return to face-to-face teaching, there is a chance to optimise the resources used to deliver RSE. However, schools need adequate funding and flexibility to allow educational recovery (National Foundation for Educational Research 2021). Providing this is the responsibility of central government, and provision needs to be made for both independent as well as state-funded schools. Different schools likely require different interventions to best support the emotional and academic requirements of their students. The tailoring of RSE education to each school will also require active support from senior management, and adequate time for teachers to develop materials, plan and deliver sessions without overburdening them.

Strengths and limitations

Like all research, this study has its limitations. There was likely selection bias in recruitment, as the teachers most engaged in provision of RSE were also those most likely to volunteer their time to be interviewed, and purposive sampling does not avoid this potential bias. Some participants may also have acted as advocates for comprehensive RSE education in their school, and the problems discussed may be even more pronounced in schools that do not have a staff member actively engaged in improving RSE. However, the participants represent a range of school types and geographic locations, which allows for a degree of transferability of the findings overall.

In addition, the study focused on secondary school teachers, and the analysis therefore considers RSE from their viewpoint. Research into the impact of COVID-19 on the teaching of Relationships Education in primary schools is to be welcomed. Regardless of context, there are several other viewpoints to be considered; those of students, parents/other carers, school nurses and doctors, wider school staff and other stakeholders, including RSE-associated charities and SRH clinicians working in young people's clinics.

Conclusion

COVID-19 seriously disrupted Relationships and Sex Education in England in several ways including difficulty in moving teaching to an online platform and loss of a holistic or supportive context, such as school nurse presence, visits to and from local SRH clinics and school-wide pastoral support. The adverse impacts on students relate not only to understanding of key topics within RSE, but also their ability to develop healthy relationships. In many schools, these impacts have been compounded by the low priority accorded to RSE once face-to-face teaching resumed. It is absolutely crucial that RSE is not lost amongst competing priorities as school timetables normalise, including within national 'catch up' programmes following COVID-19. Returning to face-to-face teaching presents an opportunity to review how RSE teaching could be improved, including adequate RSE teaching time in the curriculum, and the use of digital health interventions.

Note

1. Safeguarding concerns can arise among students who respond to RSE material in a concerning way to RSE material (e.g by disclosing concerning sexual or romantic experiences), which will therefore require support from the wider pastoral and school safeguarding team.

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