

Title Introduction

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Introduction

Michael Hand and Stephen G. Parker

The articles collected in this Special Policy Issue of *Journal of Philosophy of Education* began life as papers presented at a 2021 online conference entitled Relationships and Sex Education: Philosophical and Historical Perspectives. Co-sponsored by the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain (PESGB) and the History of Education Society, UK (HES, UK), the conference brought together an international group of philosophers, historians and social scientists to consider the aims, challenges and possibilities of Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in schools. The conference was prompted by the introduction of compulsory RSE in English secondary schools, and compulsory Relationships Education in English primary schools, in September 2020. Our original plan was to hold an in-person conference at the University of Birmingham in June 2020, shortly before the new statutory requirements came into force, but COVID-19 delayed us by a year and pushed the event online. In the end, the virtual format worked in our favour: it facilitated the participation of many more overseas speakers and attendees than would have been able to travel in person to Birmingham. In particular, it enabled us to secure all five of our first-choice keynote speakers: David Archard (Queen's University Belfast), Cris Mayo (University of Vermont), Lisa Andersen (Juilliard, New York), Lauren Bialystok (University of Toronto) and Jonathan Zimmerman (University of Pennsylvania).

England's new statutory guidance on RSE (DfE, 2019) has been broadly welcomed by RSE practitioners and theorists. For the first time, schools have a legal obligation to teach 'the fundamental building blocks and characteristics of positive relationships' (p.19) and to 'give young people the information they need to help them develop healthy, nurturing relationships of all kinds' (p.25). And the guidance is impressively ambitious in scope. It specifies what pupils should know by the end of their schooling about families, friendships, online relationships, intimate and sexual relationships, and personal safety. The curriculum is required to cover marriage, pregnancy, contraception, abortion, sexually-transmitted infections, consent, rape, sexual harassment, domestic abuse, pornography, sexting, menstruation, fertility, menopause, sexual orientation and gender identity. Alongside knowledge and understanding of these topics, educators are charged with cultivating in pupils a range of 'character traits' and 'personal attributes', including 'honesty, integrity, courage, humility, kindness, generosity, trustworthiness and a sense of justice' (pp.25-6). The guidance also covers the right of schools with a religious character to offer a 'distinctive faith perspective on relationships' (p.12), the expectation that teaching about LGBT people will be 'sensitive and age appropriate in approach and content' (p.15), the requirement on schools to 'work closely with parents' (p.17) on the planning and delivery of RSE, and the right of parents to withdraw their child from sex education 'up to and until three terms before the child turns 16' (p.18).

Notwithstanding its favourable reception among RSE professionals, the guidance has occasioned no little controversy. The largest share of news headlines went to the protests in 2019 outside a number of Birmingham primary schools over their interpretation of 'age appropriate' teaching about same-sex relationships. The schools in question were following

the No Outsiders programme, which promotes understanding and inclusion of LGBT people through storybooks featuring positive representations of non-traditional families. The protesters' complaint was that, even in this form, LGBT content is unnecessarily confusing for primary school children. In the words of one parent: 'Do you know how hard it is to explain to a four-year-old why she doesn't have two daddies?' (Ferguson, 2019). The spat led to criticism of the guidance for leaving the interpretation of 'age appropriate' to the discretion of schools. Sarah Hewitt-Clarkson, head of one of the embattled Birmingham primaries, issued an understandable plea for help: 'This is where the DfE needs to come in and say every school is expected to tell pupils that some people have two mummies. Full stop' (Whittaker, 2019).

But this was not the only bone of contention. Other criticism has focused on the attention given to the cultivation of virtues ('Teaching virtues has never featured in the research evidence on effective RSE'), on the decision not to make sex education compulsory in primary schools, and on the failure to address the question of appropriate vocabulary in sex education (Emmerson, 2018). Critics have worried that teaching 'what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in relationships' oversteps the boundaries of formal education and brings pupils 'into conflict with the values of their families' (Mitchell, 2021). Some think the guidance makes it too difficult for parents to withdraw their children from sex education (CARE, 2021), while others think the parental right of withdrawal should not have been granted at all (Whitlock, 2021). And objections have been raised to the 'faith-based carve-outs' that allow religious schools to teach RSE from a faith perspective (Humanists UK, 2019).

The arrival of compulsory RSE in England occasioned our conference, but did not limit its temporal or geographical scope. We invited philosophical and historical papers dealing with any aspect of RSE, over any period of time and in any national context, and encouraged presenters to connect their analyses to the new statutory guidance for English schools only where it made sense to do so. In the event, almost all the conference papers examined themes and issues with a direct bearing on the content of the guidance. Of the 30 or so papers presented over the two days of the conference, 13 have been selected for inclusion here in revised, refined or expanded form.

The first three articles are descended from our keynote presentations. David Archard extends and amends his influential, consent-focused account of sex education, according to which children should be taught that 'whatever is consented to by those capable of giving their consent and which harms no-one else is morally permissible' (Archard, 2000, p.41). Here he identifies some of the ways in which consensual sex can be morally bad and recommends that sex educators supplement the standard of consent with the cultivation of certain virtues. Cris Mayo considers how schools might teach gender identity and tackle transphobia and makes two helpful suggestions: first, students should be introduced to recent developments in the biological sciences that complicate binary notions of sex; and second, they should engage with decolonizing approaches to sex and gender that show how unjust social arrangements have served to suppress gender diversity. Finally, Lisa Andersen and Lauren Bialystok draw on work from their forthcoming book *Touchy Subject: The History and Philosophy of Sex Education* (Bialystok and Andersen, 2022) to ask whether sex education works. They provide a historical overview of attempts to evaluate sex education programmes and unpick the features of these programmes that make evaluating them so difficult.

The next three articles are adapted from contributions to an invited symposium on consent and mutuality in sex education. In a recent article in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, Sharon Lamb, Sam Gable and Doret de Ruyter argue that consent is insufficiently demanding as a standard of ethical sex, that sex must be mutual as well as consensual, and that ‘the standard of mutuality should be taught in all schools’ (Lamb, Gable and de Ruyter, 2021, p.282). Here, Michael Hand and Michael Reiss advance objections to that argument and Lamb and Gable respond. Hand contends that schools should not endorse the mutuality standard because prohibiting non-mutual sex is an unjustified constraint on freedom and because the standard is too imprecise. Reiss proposes that respect for persons trumps both mutuality and consent as the overriding standard of ethical sex. In response, Lamb and Gable point out that they are calling for a paradigm shift in ethical thinking: it is when we come to see the other as situated, encumbered and vulnerable that the case for the mutuality standard becomes compelling.

The remaining seven articles are developed from papers heard in parallel sessions at the conference. Ruth Wareham takes issue with the right of religious schools, in England’s statutory guidance, to teach RSE from a faith perspective, warning of the tendency of faith-based curricula to misrepresent matters of fact and promote controversial moral views. Sean Henry and Joshua Heyes challenge the prevalence of dialogue as the preferred mode of engagement in RSE lessons, and in parental consultations about sex education, and explore the benefits of moving from dialogue to conversation. Jeff Standley argues that romantic love myths play a significant and harmful role in our thinking about intimate relationships and calls for sustained attention to their shortcomings in the classroom. Sin Guanci advocates hip-hop pedagogy in sex education as a way of making the subject student-centred, anti-racist, inclusive and culturally affirming. Caitlin Howlett draws attention to the problem of parental deference in RSE and invites us to consider whose experiences are left out of curricula shaped largely by the preferences of parents. Aidan McGlynn reflects on the kind of education needed to mitigate the influence of pornography on students, explains why it is misleading to insist that porn is ‘just fiction’, and identifies one of the ways in which people – especially women – are objectified by porn. Finally, Alison MacKenzie revisits the Belfast Rugby Rape Trial, which triggered rallies and protests across Northern Ireland in 2018, to explore rape myths, misogyny, the epistemic injustices experienced by women in patriarchal societies, and how RSE might respond.

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[Michael Hand is Professor of Philosophy of Education at the University of Birmingham, UK. and current Chair of PESGB.](#)

[Stephen G. Parker is Professor of History of Religion and Education at the University of Worcester, UK and current President of the History of Education Society, UK.](#)