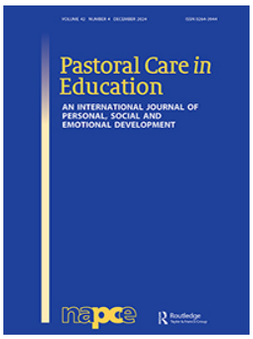
Young adults' perspectives on sex education at school in Scotland



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ABSTRACT

There is a wealth of evidence on the benefits to young people's health and academic achievement from timely, good-quality sex education. Conversely, sex education that is poor or too late poses risks to mental and physical health. This small-scale qualitative study set in Scotland used semi-structured questionnaires to ask 48 young adults to reflect on the sex education that they received at school and to consider its usefulness to their lives. Findings reveal that what was taught often came too late to be useful and was covered in insufficient depth by teachers who often seemed awkward or to lack confidence. The narrow heteronormative focus often made LGBT young people feel excluded or stigmatised. There are clear implications for teacher educators, school leaders and policy makers: the need to review how teachers are prepared for their role in sex education and reconsider how the subject is situated within the curriculum and the school timetable. Although often seen as a discrete part of curriculum, sex education is influenced by and builds on what is happening across all learning, and reciprocally, if done well, sex education can enhance the positive relationships necessary for a safe, inclusive learning culture across the whole school.

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Sex education; relationships; teacher confidence; pedagogy; inclusivity

Introduction

This paper presents the findings of a small-scale qualitative study that explored young adults' perspectives of the sex education teaching that they received at school in Scotland. Variously known as comprehensive sex education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 2018), sexuality education (van Leent et al., 2023) relationships, sexual health and parenthood (Scottish Government, 2023) amongst other labels, the term used in this study is sex education as it was the one most meaningful to young people when they were consulted prior to the research design.

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Defining sex education

Although the labels change across, and sometimes within, different countries, there is some consistency to definitions of sex education due mainly to the influence of UNESCO who define it as:

> curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality … to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to: realize their health, wellbeing and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and, understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives (UNESCO, 2018, p. 10).

However, in their review of literature, van Leent et al. (2023) found increasing differences in both definitions and curriculum content. Similarly, Goldfarb and Lieberman (2020) identify the messiness of multiple definitions and goals, and the challenges this brings to evaluation and comparison. van Leent et al. (2023) summarise that sex education involves learning in four key areas: physical health, sexual and gender identity, pleasure and relationships, and that it should be age-appropriate, culturally relevant and non-judgemental. Additionally, Seiler-Ramadas et al. (2021)'s definition recognises the importance of sex education in building self-esteem, empowering young people to develop strong and healthy relationships and aiming to prevent coercion and violence. These definitions are particularly helpful as they resonate with those in Scottish policy where sex education is seen to fulfil the right of the child to learn about their '*growing bodies, relationships, sexuality, sexual health and parenthood*' (Scottish Government, 2023, p. 6). Described as '*learning and understanding of healthy relationships'* that *'develops personal resilience*', there is also acknowledgement of the preventative role sex education can play in reducing abuse and violence (Scottish Government, 2023, p. 6). The commonalities in these particular definitions have been used as the guiding ones within this study.

Scottish context

In Scotland where this study is situated, since the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence in 2010, sex education has been part of the health and wellbeing curriculum area. Many elements of this area, for example, physical activity or mental health, are the responsibility of all who work in a school, rather than something undertaken by a single department or individual (Scottish Government, 2010). Whilst the sex and reproductive health element of sex education is not the responsibility of all, the cross-cutting themes of health and wellbeing, for example the promotion of positive relationships or social, emotional and mental health, are expected to underpin sex education lessons and shape the ethos in which the pupils learn (Scottish Government, 2023). One

of the core components of health and wellbeing is 'relationships, sexual health and parenthood' in which the overarching aim is:

> Learners develop an understanding of how to maintain positive relationships with a variety of people and are aware of how thoughts, feelings, attitudes, values and beliefs can influence decisions about relationships, and sexual health. They develop their understanding of the complex roles and responsibilities of being a parent or carer. (Scottish Government, nd:16)

The curriculum expectations for each age group (from 3 to 15 years old) are set out in some detail (Scottish Government, n. d. -a). Additionally, from 2021, Scotland became the first country to introduce an LGBT inclusive curriculum with the aspiration to improve the experience in schools of LGBT young people through promoting equality and inclusion and reducing bullying (Stone & Farrar, 2021). There is an expectation that approaches to LGBT inclusion will permeate all learning, including sex education (Scottish Government, 2023). Education curriculum and policy is reviewed by Education Scotland with the aim of improvement through supporting self-evaluation and development (Scottish Government, n. d. -b). In reality, this means that while there is the expectation that the curriculum will be taught there is little focus on sex and relationship education within formal inspections unless schools raise it as a focus.

Review of the literature

Research into sex education has found that it is most effective when it is age-appropriate and incremental (Pound et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2018), with sufficient quality and quantity of teaching at the right time (van Leent et al., 2023). It needs to include the development of emotional literacy, self-esteem and decision-making skills in addition to sexual and reproductive health (Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2021; UNESCO; 2018). However, in practice sex education often comes too late, is focussed on risk prevention and distances the act of sex from pleasure and emotions (McKay et al., 2017; Melendez-Torres et al., 2023; Pound et al., 2017; Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2021). There is an agreement that sex education should be inclusive (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2020; Kedzior et al., 2022; Scottish Government, 2023; UNESCO, 2018; van Leent et al., 2023). However, it is often almost completely heteronormative (Lindberg & Kantor, 2022; Melendez-Torres et al., 2023; Pound et al., 2017; York et al., 2024b), neglecting the needs of those '*outside stereotypical mindsets of sexuality and sexual relationships*' (Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2021, p. 495). When sex education is not inclusive, it implies that homosexuality and gender fluidity are not important, which can result in deficit attitudes and prejudice permeating the school community (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2020; Kedzior et al., 2022; Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2021). Scottish guidance (Scottish Government, 2023) also advocates teaching that encourages

the challenging of gender stereotypes. However, Mayo (2022) suggests that US educators can be reluctant to engage with gender diversity because of their discomfort or lack of confidence in this area. A wealth of research also suggests that teachers feel external pressure from, for example, parents or religious communities (Pound et al., 2017; Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2021; Walker et al., 2022; York et al., 2021b). Prominent in the literature is the need for teachers to be trained for sex education (Pound et al., 2017; Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2018; Walker et al., 2022) with both Depauli and Wolfgang (2018) and Dinamarca Figueroa et al. (2021) advocating changes to teacher qualification programmes to ensure this. However, this review has not been able to find any research into sex education within teacher education.

There is consistency across the literature that when young people are asked for their views, they report that sex education starts too late, has a narrow often negative focus and is not taught well (Pound et al., 2017; Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2020). Young people would like to learn more about the emotional aspects of sexuality and sexual activity and about the power dynamics and pressures in relationships, including consent and abuse (Melendez-Torres et al., 2023; Pound et al., 2017; Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2020). Resonating with this, evaluations in Scotland found that there was a need to increase the focus on consent (Scottish Government, 2023). Understanding consent is 'an important step towards' challenging norms and reducing violence (Kedzior et al., 2022, p. 475). Indeed, Goldfarb and Lieberman (2020) found programmes exploring consent and abuse contributed to a reduction in victim blaming, sexist attitudes and rape myths. York et al., 2021a)'s young participants criticised the double standards often applied towards girls' versus boys' behaviours and which they believed was reinforced in some educational resources. Seiler-Ramadas et al. (2020) found that young people valued involvement in programmes on safe relationships. Kedzior et al. (2022) recognised that placing relationships at the centre of sex education from a young age provided beneficial knowledge and skills that increased the likelihood of young people's safety in sexual relationships. Sex education is particularly appreciated by pupils whose parents do not discuss the subject with them at home or where there are religious or cultural limitations imposed on sex, relationships or contraception (Melendez-Torres et al., 2023; Pound et al., 2017; Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2020).

Why this research is important

Good quality, multi-component sex education serves as both risk reduction and health promotion (Lindberg & Kantor, 2022; Lindberg & Maddow-Zimet, 2011; Pound et al., 2017; Schmitt et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2018). It has been found to contribute to a reduction in sexually transmitted infection and unplanned pregnancies (Lindberg & Kantor, 2022; Pound et al., 2017). Conversely, the absence of sex education poses risks, including leaving

young people more vulnerable to abuse and trauma (Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2021). For girls and young women in particular, absence can increase the likelihood of poor body image, depression and risk-taking behaviours (Schmitt et al., 2022). Young men are more likely to engage in unprotected sex and at an earlier age; those from minority groups, are often left particularly vulnerable (Pound et al., 2017; Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2021). Furthermore, sex education often facilitates social support as well as knowledge and skills development (Schmitt et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2018). It can promote the development of healthy behaviours which can in turn serve as protective factors against abuse, increase capacity to engage in safe healthy relationships and lead to a reduction in the perpetration of harmful actions (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2020; Lindberg & Kantor, 2022; van Leent et al., 2023). Specifically, Goldfarb and Lieberman (2020) found that sex education could reduce homophobia, increase understanding of gender and contribute to a reduction in related abuse or abusive relationships.

Although, the internet, literature, families, or peers can support the development of young people's understanding of puberty, sex or intimate relationships, there is considerable evidence that this is much less effective than school lessons (Pound et al., 2017). School-based sex education has been linked to increased age at first sex, both partners 'equally willing', fewer sexual partners in adolescence and generally better sexual health knowledge (Kedzior et al., 2022; Pound et al., 2017), as well as the reduction in instances of prejudice in school (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2020). Furthermore, young people value schools as a reliable source of knowledge on sex and relationships (Kedzior et al., 2022). When young people are left to learn elsewhere, they can become vulnerable in many ways (Pound et al., 2017; Scottish Government, 2023). In addition to benefits to their personal lives, positive reproductive health can increase a young person's school attendance and consequently their success in school (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2020).

In summary, there is a significant body of research evaluating sex education, some of which has sought the views of educators or young people. It is clear that good quality, sex education in schools can make a valuable contribution to the positive sexual reproductive health and lives of young people. However, it is not known whether within the curriculum differences of Scotland, sex education there meets the needs of young people in the 21st century. Thus, this study asked young adults in Scotland to reflect on their school sex education and consider how useful it was to puberty and their life as a young adult. More specifically, the following research questions were addressed:

Research question

What are recent school leavers' opinions of the sex education that they received at school in Scotland?

Sub-questions:

(a) What content was and was not included within their curriculum?
(b) What do they see as the strengths, weaknesses and gaps?
(c) To what extent was sex education useful preparation for puberty and adult life?

In addressing these questions, this study fills a gap in the current literature in relation to sex education within the Scottish context.

Methodology and methods

This small-scale qualitative study was situated within an interpretivist perspective, seeking insight into the experiences, beliefs and opinions of individuals (Cohen et al., 2018). As such, it was appropriate to use an instrument that could be disseminated to young adults across Scotland but which also gave respondents the space to explain their experience in as much detail as they liked (Cohen et al., 2018).

Participants

The aims of the research required participants who had left school and who could reflect on the overall usefulness of their education from their perspective as adults. All participants had experience of attending a Scottish primary and/or secondary school within which the national curriculum, Curriculum for Excellence would have guided the content of their learning. However, in addition to diversity across schools, educators and years, each respondent would have their own unique experience, set of needs and priorities that would further shape their perspective. The invitation to the survey was shared with universities, colleges and through school alumnae networks in September 2023. The

Table 1. Sample demographics.

Current employment or study context	No.
In university	40
In full time employment	6
In college	2
Not in education, employment or training	0
In part time employment	0
Total participants	48

aim was to recruit participants from a range of employment and study contexts. Table 1 shows sample demographics.

As Table 1 shows, 48 participants volunteered to complete the online survey. The response rate from those outside the university was low. Additional attempts to recruit participants from outside universities were made by asking contacts in the age range to share the survey invitation. This generated an extra three participants. Following a pre-study consultation with young people on what would encourage or deter young adults from participating in such research, the sex, gender identity and age of participants were not collected. However, the year in which they left secondary school gives some general indication of age. See Table 2.

Data collection

As the research aims sought opinions and perspectives, a Qualtrics survey with a series of open-ended questions was developed as the most appropriate way to gather data that answered the research question but which did not presuppose responses (Cohen et al., 2018). A survey was chosen over interviews in the belief that young people might be more comfortable sharing their experiences and the impact on their adolescence and adult sex life anonymously in writing than face to face. The open-ended questions in the survey gave participants the space to describe their experience or viewpoint in their own words. The survey also contained multiple choice questions for demographic information and to allow for perceived usefulness of the sex education received to be measured.

Analysis

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis approach. The survey was designed with groups of questions (subsets), each of which collected data relating to a specific sub-question:

(a) What content was and was not included within their curriculum?
(b) What do they see as the strengths, weaknesses and gaps?

Table 2. What year did you leave secondary school?

What year did you leave secondary school?	No.
2023	1
2022	9
2021	6
2020	2
2019	7
2018	9
2017	3
2016	2
2015	3
Before 2015	4
Unavailable	2
Total participants	48

(c) To what extent was sex education useful preparation for puberty and adult life?

Looking at the data from the subsets, codes were identified. These were then clustered to form themes. Comparisons were made across themes within each subset, looking for themes common to the data as a whole. It was found that there was a consistency of themes across all subsets, which suggested a further robustness to the analysis process. Table 3 shows illustrative codes for each subset and the themes to which they relate.

Reflexivity was also used to make sure that the researcher was continuously checking that bias of any kind was not influencing the process (Pillow, 2003). Tables 6, 9 and 10 in the findings section map out the findings alongside the themes.

Ethics

Ethical approval was received from the Moray House School of Education and Sport Ethics Committee, University of Edinburgh, reference: DHOL1607202. Participation was deemed to pose minimal risk. Respondents could not access the survey until they had accessed participant information and confirmed informed consent. As there was a possibility that respondents might experience emotional distress, the survey included links to sources of support, such as ones for those who have experienced sexual or domestic abuse. Approaches to the dissemination of the survey were intended to ensure that participants were over 18. With one exception, personal information was not collected, and the survey was disseminated across the country, making identification of participants from their responses highly unlikely. The exception was that participants were invited to leave their email address should they wish to be contacted for a follow-up study. This information was stored separately for security reasons.

Strengths & limitations

The sample size and the predominance of university students within this is a potential limitation. The findings can only be taken in relation to this and are therefore not representative of the population as a whole.

Table 3. Illustrative codes and final themes within question subsets.

Question Subset	Example of codes appearing in subset	Themes in subset
a (content)	Not enough depth	Amount & quality;
	Menstruation	Content
	More inclusive	Inclusivity
	Smaller groups	Teacher's role
b (strengths, weaknesses, gaps)	More often	Amount & quality
	Contraception	Content
	Cisgender	Inclusivity
	More comfortable	Teacher's role
c (usefulness)	Not realistic	Amount & quality
	Too narrow	Content
	Normalised	Inclusivity
	Comfort	Teacher's role

In retrospect, it would have been better to request more demographic data, giving participants a 'prefer not to answer' option. However, in line with feedback on how to reduce aspects that might deter participants from completing the survey, demographic data collected were kept to a minimum.

Unfortunately, this means that the sex and gender of participants were not collected. Consequently, it is not clear whether the prevalence of some themes was due to the sex or gender identity of participants. It would be beneficial to include such data in future studies.

The strength of the study is the way in which the open text questions allowed participants to share what was most important or relevant to them, resulting in rich data.

Findings

Just over half of participants found the sex education they received in school useful to a certain extent. There were common content areas recognised as valuable. Whilst most participants had something positive to say, a predominant theme in the findings was of insufficient depth, breadth and detail in the teaching that participants received. The content that participants would like to be taught and the changes that they would like to see outnumbered their positive comments.

As there is overlap between sub-questions a and b, the findings relating to these are presented together. This starts with the perceived strengths before moving to consider the gaps and suggestions for change.

Strengths

Table 4 shows the content described as useful by participants, how many found it useful and at which stage of their education:

The most valuable content in primary school related to puberty, whereas in secondary school, contraception and health were most appreciated. This is consistent with the likely priorities associated with those age groups; with

Table 4. What content did you find useful?

What content did you find useful?	Primary School	Secondary School
Anatomy	3	1
Consent/boundaries	2	4
Contraception	1	8
Health STIs etc	0	8
Menstruation	22	3
Peer pressure	1	0
Puberty	7	0
Relationships	1	0
Reproduction	7	1
Safe sexual relationships	0	4

younger children needing to understand upcoming puberty and older pupils focused on future or even current sex lives.

Gaps in provision

Table 5 shows the topics that participants would like to have been taught or taught more of in primary and secondary school.

Interestingly, like the content valued by participants, menstruation and puberty are again the most prevalent foci for primary school, with some indication in participants' full responses that what was taught, if it was taught, was too little or too late. Similarly, contraception appears high up in the gaps in secondary school content. However, the most common content gaps identified in relation to secondary school, but absent from the list of valued content are LGBT relationships and sex.

Suggestions for change

Table 6 shows what participants would change about sex education, (excluding any additional content already considered in Table 5).

As illustrated in the most common suggested change, the survey responses were dominated by comments about the cursory nature of sex education; that it was minimal, lacking depth and with a narrow scope. Such lack of scope is evident in participants' desire for an education that recognised and respected sexuality and gender identity outside of heterosexual and cisgender. Increased inclusivity is a separate item in Table 6 which overlaps with sexuality but is distinct in that it was used by some participants to encompass a wider range of issues such as health or disability. The amount and timing of teaching was another common theme, whether in relation to allowing more time for sex education or making sure the teaching did not come too late to be useful. Several participants noted the way that teaching was marred by awkward or uncomfortable teachers, and by classmates who mocked and laughed. Twelve of the suggested changes related

Table 5. What content would you like to have seen at each stage?

What content would you like to have been taught?	Primary School	Secondary School	Total
LGBT relationships/sex	5	7	12
Menstruation in more depth including side effects,	10	0	10
Puberty (before it starts/all aspects)	7	2	9
Consent	5	3	8
Sexual/reproductive health including where to go for help	4	4	8
Sex for pleasure	4	3	7
Contraception- why you would use it/more types	1	5	6
Emotions and sex or puberty/anxiety about sex	3	3	6
Masturbation (not just boys)	3	2	5
Anatomy (female body)	2	3	5
Pregnancy (planned, unplanned, complications of)	3	2	5
Relationships (including recognising unsafe ones)	0	2	2
Self care	0	2	2

Table 6. If you could change anything about the teaching, what would it be?

If you could change anything about the teaching, what would it be?	No.	Theme
More in depth, informative, useful, relevant, realistic	15	Amount & quality
LGBT friendly/non-cisgender friendly	10	Inclusivity
More inclusive	8	Inclusivity
More often/more time	8	Amount & quality
A more comfortable atmosphere	7	Teacher's role
Less shame/more normalisation-emphasis on how to be comfortable within yourself	6	Inclusivity Teacher's role
Getting qualified knowledgeable people who can talk sensitively to young people without making them anxious	5	Teacher's role
More discussion including space to speak with teachers outside of whole class/in smaller groups	5	Teacher's role
Less dated	5	Content
Start or have more at a younger age	4	Amount & quality
Pay equal attention to both sexes	4	Inclusivity Content
Teach boys and girls separately	4	Teacher's role
Teaching boys about girls/female issues and girls about boys/male issues	3	Teacher's role Content
Smaller groups	2	Teacher's role
Effective resources and teacher engagement with resources	2	Teacher's role
To have sex ed in primary school	2	Amount & quality
Nothing	2	Amount & quality
More serious	2	Teacher's role
More openness	2	Teacher's role
More clear	2	Teacher's role
More memorable	2	Content
Not having to watch a baby being born at primary school	1	Content
Should not have sex ed in primary school	1	Amount & quality
More support	1	Teacher's role

to the approach taken to teaching particularly one that allowed the pupils to feel comfortable enough to ask questions and learn. Table 7 gives more insight into this suggestion.

Usefulness

Table 8 shows how participants responded when asked their opinion on the usefulness of sex education teaching.

These views and the factors determining participants' ratings of usefulness provide greater insight into their overall experiences and opinions of their sex education. Of the three participants who rated their overall sex education useful, only one explained why they had said this, stating '*Preparation was enough but very basic*. This explanation has much in common with the explanations from those saying no and to a certain extent as can be seen in Tables 9 and 10 respectively.

Discussion

As the findings are overlapping, the main aspects will now be discussed thematically, drawing from the literature that underpinned this study.

Table 7. Did you feel confident asking questions in class?

Did you feel confident asking questions?	Number of participants
Yes-in front of the class	2
Yes-quietly to the teacher	4
Yes- In an anonymous box	10
Sometimes	12
No never	20
Total	48

Table 8. Did you find sex education useful preparation for life?

Did you find sex education useful preparation for life?									
	Primary School			Secondary School			Whole Education		
	No.	Sample %	Question %	No.	Sample %	Question %	No.	Sample %	Question %
Yes	5	10%	11%	4	8%	11%	3	6%	8%
No	19	40%	40%	15	31%	42%	14	29%	39%
To a certain extent	23	48%	49%	17	35%	47%	19	40%	53%
Total responses	47	98%	N/A	36	75%	N/A	36	75%	N/A

Table 9. Illustrative explanations why school sex education was not useful.

Theme	Illustrative responses	No of responses in theme
Amount & quality	*It was very limited seemed more of a tick box than actually helpful or relevant to real life*	10
	I wasn't taught sex education at home and the sex education I was taught at school was wholly insufficient whereas boys in our year were well versed in porn which led to many of the girls learning their sex education based on the beliefs and ideas that 12-year-old boys had based on the porn they watched.	
Content	*I found it not useful as the education was very much just the biological way of sex and didn't involve anything about emotions and relationships*	8
	Didn't prepare you well for knowledge of relationships and reproductive health. Sex was framed largely solely as a means to get pregnant	
Teacher's role	*The class we were set with weren't behaving and made jokes so I wasn't comfortable and was disengaged*	1
Inclusivity	*Very vague, no LGBT education at all.*	1

Table 10. Illustrative explanations why school sex education was useful to a certain extent.

Theme	Illustrative responses	No of responses in theme
Content	*I learned how to put a condom on and not much else was useful*	13
	I still have to Google things to this day to see if what my vagina is doing is normal or discuss with my girlfriends to check because we weren't taught it	
Amount & quality	*We were taught the basics but it would have been nice to have had some more detail.*	7
	I felt that my sex education gave me a foundation to build my knowledge on but did not fully prepare me for life as a young adult in 2023	
Inclusivity	*It should be more normalised and more inclusive for everyone; it was very conservative when I was at school.*	2
	Little to nothing about life and sex as a non-heterosexual person was provided	
Teacher's role	*Did provide some useful information but due to the immaturity in classes things just got out of hand*	1

Amount and quality

Lindberg and Maddow-Zimet (2011) and Walker et al. (2022) found that there was a lack of consistency of depth and quality in provision across the US and Australia, respectively. The variation in perceptions of usefulness and the overlap between useful and desired content in this study suggest that inconsistency may also be the case in Scotland.

The 13 participants who did not find sex education useful or useful only to a certain extent cited insufficient depth, range or usefulness as reasons, as this quote exemplifies:

> It gave understanding to the basic aspects but not enough to provide a comprehensive understanding on all aspects of sexual health/relationships

Similarly, Lindberg and Maddow-Zimet (2011)'s US study found that only half of adolescents in the US received sex education of sufficient quality and amount. Furthermore, five participants said they would like to have had more time for discussion. It is likely that these perceived insufficiencies were a consequence of timetabling. To achieve the depth, range and amount desired by participants, more time would probably need to be allocated to sex education. Seiler-Ramadas et al. (2021) argue that sex education should be a regular and essential aspect of the school curriculum. However, Schmitt et al. (2022), p. 06) found sex education to be '*ad hoc*' rather than '*integrated*' within the school curriculum, quite possibly as Seiler-Ramadas et al. (2021) and Walker et al. (2022) note, because sex education lessons must compete with other school subjects that are considered to need more time.

Some of the aspects that participants in this study found missing, such as inclusivity or discussion of consent, could have been taking place outside sex education classes. Goldfarb and Lieberman (2020) note that many topics related to sex education could be addressed in other areas of the curriculum as a way to offset the limited time available for sex education. Scottish curriculum policy and guidance has advocated such interdisciplinarity since 2010, and so this may have been the case for participants of this study (Scottish Government, 2023). However, there needs to be an explicit connection made between subjects so that pupils can transfer learning from one subject to another. It is only conjecture but if participants in this study received such teaching, as is likely, it may have served to emphasise the absence in sex education classes of, for example, reference to human rights or gender.

Puberty and menstruation were identified both as valuable content in primary school lessons and as gaps in provision, with the comment that the teaching needed to start '*before it*[puberty] *actually began*'. Insufficient information can perpetuate any stigma attached to menstruation and convey implicit messages that it should be hidden (Schmitt et al., 2022).

Furthermore, when teaching comes too late there is a missed opportunity for young people to share questions and anxieties which can be a bonding experience that helps them manage the challenges of menstruating while in school (Ludington, 2024; Schmitt et al., 2022). The unsuitable timing identified by participants might be because young people are reaching puberty younger (Schmitt et al., 2022), and that the school curriculum failed to accommodate this. Whatever the reason, teaching that came too late meant that many participants reached puberty without knowing enough, if anything, about it, which Schmitt et al. (2022) argue can be distressing.

Participants found teaching about sex also came too late. This is also at odds with the previously mentioned agreement in the literature that teaching should be age and developmentally appropriate (Pound et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2018; van Leent et al., 2023). As a consequence, many participants did not know what was going on with their bodies. They explained that the questions they had gone unanswered, often leaving them resorting to other, less reliable sources of information, such as their peers, pornography or internet searches. This is consistent with Pound et al. (2017)'s findings that sex education was often delivered too late and with Goldstein (2020)'s work that found young people often used pornography as a source of sex education. The risks from poor, absent or delayed sex education are not just related to teenage or underage sex but can extend into adulthood. This current study did not ask about perceived consequences of sex education but it is clear from several responses that some participants learned about sex through having it, with all the risks that brings:

> (I) was unsure about contraception methods and their side effects

> I think most of us learned through our own experiences or friends' experiences

> I believe for many women I know including myself they can get to mid-20s before they really start to learn about their own bodies, what is normal and what is not, what they can expect and deserve from sex and intimate relationships

Pound et al. (2017) point to the sensitivity of sex as a subject as a reason why teaching can be delayed until pupils are older, with Goldfarb and Lieberman (2020) finding that some educators think it is too traumatising to teach at a younger age. Irrespective of the reasons why the education came too late or not at all, the responses from this research suggest inadequate teaching can be just as traumatic.

Content

Setting aside aspects of content that have been considered as part of the amount and quality of teaching discussion, one of the main content areas that participants wanted to learn more about was sex. They perceived that a very narrow view of sex was presented that completely ignored relationships or sex that was not heterosexual or for the purposes of reproduction. This resonates with Pound et al. (2017) and Melendez-Torres et al. (2023)'s findings and might in part be explained by Walker et al. (2022)'s suggestion that teachers not specifically trained in sex education tend to focus on biological aspects. Such a narrow focus on sex for reproduction left participants believing school should have taught them more about sex for pleasure and masturbation. Again, this resonates with previous research and literature that found the pleasure of sex is rarely covered in school (Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2021) and that young people wanted to know how to make sex enjoyable (Kedzior et al., 2022; Melendez-Torres et al., 2023; Pound et al., 2017).

Participants also asked for more input on the social, emotional and mental health aspect of both sex and relationships, including consent. Seiler-Ramadas et al. (2021) believe this is missing from many countries' provision because of a focus in policy on the technical and on risk reduction. However, in contrast to this, participants also said they did not receive enough teaching about sexual health, contraception and unwanted pregnancy, including where to go for help. In this regard, they also spoke of teachers' ineffective use of outdated resources. These findings align with the work of Walker et al. (2022) who revealed that teachers wanted more and better resources for contraception and sexual health. Similarly, York et al., (2021b) participants also spoke of unrealistic resources, particularly in relation to sexting.

Inclusivity

Scottish Government (2023) guidance, new in August 2023, too late for the participants in this study, states that:

> When RSHP education is inclusive, LGBT young people are more likely to feel included and accepted within the school community. When young people see themselves reflected in what they learn, it helps them feel like they belong and that who they are is not wrong (2023:19)

However, participants were frustrated by the focus on cisgender and heterosexual sex, relationships and puberty. The desire for more inclusive sex education in both content and values dominated the survey responses as encapsulated in this response about change needed:

> a more diverse view of sex ed and relationships, need more inclusivity and diversity to steer away from teaching through lens of gender stereotypes

Again, this is not a view unique to this research. There is agreement in the literature that the needs of young people who are not cisgender or heterosexual are not being met (Kedzior et al., 2022; Lindberg & Kantor, 2022; Melendez-Torres et al., 2023; Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2020).

Even within cisgender content, participants reported inequities between both the quantity of time spent on girls' needs versus boys' and the way in which some experiences, for example masturbation or pleasure, were confined to a single sex even though applicable to all. These quotes are from changes participants believed necessary:

> More on reproductive health and female anatomy - sex was framed around boys and parenthood - female pleasure not really spoken about

> that masturbation and sex are enjoyable for both parties and not just men

An imbalance of content only serves to perpetuate stereotypes or misogynistic attitudes (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2020; Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2021). Participants asked for more time to discuss issues in sex education lessons and it would seem that good quality time is necessary for pupils to become aware of and begin to understand all the related issues. Stone and Farrar (2021) suggest a critical literacy approach to increased inclusivity. Similarly, Mayo (2022) advocates asking young people to engage with themes such as gender, sexuality and power within sex education, in addition to helping them to understand that norms and so-called categories change over time and will continue to do so. York et al., 2021a) also recognise the value of dialogue for helping young people identify issues such as objectification, shaming and blame.

The teacher's role

Participants listed the need for teachers with sensitivity, able to create a comfortable atmosphere which minimised shame and normalised diversity and which allowed for openness and discussion. Both Buston et al. (2002) and Walker et al. (2022)'s findings reveal that the biggest impact on sex education is the way that it is delivered, making the teacher's role fundamental to success. Participants in this study mentioned teachers who were uncomfortable or who could not 'control' the class and disruptive pupils who made it hard for anyone to engage. Others spoke of an atmosphere of humour, in which both teacher and pupils found everything funny or embarrassing. This can reduce the impact of the teaching and prohibit sensitive or more serious questions as pupils fear mockery (Buston et al., 2002; Forrest et al., 2002). Furthermore, UNESCO, (2018) highlight the possibility that young people may make disclosures about sexual abuse within sex education lessons, which is less likely in a classroom that permits unkind laughter. Participants wanted the safe space that Goldfarb and Lieberman (2020) deem

essential for sex education. Pound et al. (2017), p. 12) suggest that making pupils feel safe and maintaining what they call '*excellent class control*' are easy to achieve. However, that over-simplifies the challenges, and Kedzior et al. (2022) suggest that to create a safe space, teachers need to feel confident in what they are doing. For example, if there were more sex education teaching from an earlier age, teachers and pupils would become more used to talking about these issues and the space may feel safer for all. York et al., (2021b) study highlights the impact on provision of the way in which the subject matter is conceptualised by educators, particularly when this varies considerably from the priorities and needs of the young people they are teaching. Related to this, insufficient training in sex education reduces teachers' ability to conduct lessons in a safe, supportive way and has a detrimental impact on learning (Schmitt et al., 2022; Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2022).

Consistent with Pound et al. (2017)'s findings, some participants suggested that sex education should be delivered by specialists or educators who '*know what they are talking about*'. There is recognition of the enhanced value specialists can bring to lessons (Pound et al., 2017; Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2020). However, Scottish policy is clear that sex education should be delivered by a teacher familiar to the pupils but can be enhanced by the involvement of specialist professionals (Scottish Government, 2023). Pound et al. (2017) recognise that pupils can be more embarrassed to ask questions or raise personal issues with a teacher they know well and work with outside the sex education classes. However, there is agreement in the literature that the themes of sex education and a dialogic approach both require a good relationship between teacher and pupils, particularly if, as wanted by participants, educators are to go beyond the narrow biological focus and include more on the emotions of relationships, safety, consent or problems and health issues (Kedzior et al., 2022; Kimmel et al., 2013; Pound et al., 2017; Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2018; Walker et al., 2022). Such a familiar educator can also be better placed to foster supportive relationships between the pupils (Kedzior et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2022) and create the safe inclusive space desired by participants.

It is possible that many of the suggestions for change or limitations to sex education teaching made in this study might have been addressed through delivery by better trained, more confident teachers who had chosen to teach the subject. Walker et al. (2022) highlight the positive impact on lessons of teachers who have chosen to teach sex education, recognising its importance. However, not all schools or educators may have the luxury of choice when it comes to allocating teachers to this role.

Wishing to be taught as part of a same sex group, as suggested by four participants, is quite common, although Pound et al. (2017)'s review found that women were more likely to request this than men. However, Scottish policy is

clear that all pupils should be taught together as it can be discriminatory to divide by sex (Scottish Government, 2023). Ultimately, it could well be the way that teachers manage a mixed sex class and create a safe climate for learning that has the greatest impact. Perhaps more important, distinct but overlapping suggestions within this study's findings, were that what was taught should be the same for everyone and that equal time be given to the teaching of male-specific matters as to female ones. This would mean that girls learn about male anatomy, puberty and sex, and boys about the female so that they are not left in ignorance or having to resort to less reliable sources of information, both of which can lead to misconceptions or deficit attitudes towards the other sex (Allen et al., 2011; Peranovic & Bentley, 2017; Schmitt et al., 2022). Ideally, this could be done in line with UNESCO (2018)and Scottish Government (2023) guidance, within a dialogic classroom, where pupils are encouraged, in groups or as a whole class, to discuss, question and critique as they learn. Pupils could have opportunities to consider tricky subjects such as gender, homosexuality, the male/female perspective within a safe space (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2020; Stone and Farrar, 2021). Focusing on sexting, York et al., 2021a) highlight the importance of schools creating a climate in which young people can speak openly and are encouraged to raise concerns or share experiences. In the comfortable safe ethos desired by participants of this and prior research, young people would be better able to ask questions and consider alternative perspectives without fear of embarrassment or humiliation (Kimmel et al., 2013; Schmitt et al., 2022). Through such approaches, the reduction of shame and the normalisation of difference that participants wanted might be achieved.

Conclusion and implications

In summary, these Scottish-educated participants valued much of the content received but wished for more time allocated to sex education so that there could be more breadth and depth to teaching. They would have liked teaching to go beyond heteronormative and cisgender perspectives and for teaching to take place in a more inclusive feeling ethos. Related to this, participants would have liked a safer, more comfortable atmosphere in class, with confident, knowledgeable teachers and more chances to engage in discussion and ask questions. It seems that across the decades, despite updated guidance and policy, young people and their teachers are still having an education that does not meet their expectations and needs.

Given the previously discussed literature outlining the benefits from good-quality sex education and the risks from its absence, further more extensive research in the form of interviews or case studies with school leavers and young adults would enhance the current findings. Additionally, research seeking the viewpoint of other stakeholders such as health professionals, parents and carers could also contribute to the enhancement of provision

Within the constraints of the limitations of this small-scale research, there are still key recommendations. Some clear implications from this study are the need for the teachers responsible for sex education to have sufficient training. As the landscape is continually changing, such training needs to be ongoing through professional development. However, it would also be beneficial for there to be greater emphasis on sex education within teacher education. Scrutiny of teaching qualification curricula has uncovered anecdotal data on the absence of sex education in initial teacher education which might explain the gap in literature in this area. It would be beneficial for sex education to be built into the initial teacher education of all primary school teachers and those qualifying in health education, or to form part of the inclusion and diversity aspects of all teaching qualifications. It would be relevant to carry out further research with teachers and teacher educators on what they perceive to be the barriers and facilitators to effective sex education and exploring what training or support they would find beneficial.

Implications for school leadership and policy makers, in addition to ensuring well-qualified and supported teaching staff, are the need to review both the time allocated to sex education and the content of the curriculum to ensure that there is sufficient time to cover the breadth of aspects in sufficient depth and in the spiral, developmentally appropriate way (UNESCO), 2018) guidance specifies. Furthermore, what happens in sex education builds on learning from across the curriculum and relies on a healthy, safe school culture. In turn, high-quality inclusive sex education has the potential to enhance the relationships and positive, inclusive ethos across the school. Therefore, connections need to be made within teaching to support learners to apply issues discussed in other subjects to their learning within sex education and, conversely, schools could use sex education as one way to establish respecting and valuing attitudes to diversity that can permeate their educational experience. As finance is almost always an issue and the examined school subjects are most likely to be prioritised in any school budget, the necessary up-to-date resources could be borrowed from external bodies and related health professionals.

Finally, as educators, researchers or policy makers, we must continue to listen to young people. Indeed, Scottish guidance requires that pupils are involved in co-designing the sex education curriculum they receive. However it is achieved, we need to make sure that the sex education young people experience is useful to them and that it does not come too late; otherwise, it might be argued that there is little point in doing it at all.

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