

**Voice and Agency: Co-Producing and Conducting a
Research and Engagement Project with Young People on
Sex and Relationship Education in One Local Authority in
Wales**

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Motivational quotes that kept me focused:

“It does not matter how slowly you go as long as you do not stop”

Confucius

*“Our greatest weakness lies in giving up. The most certain way to succeed is
always to try just one more time”*

Thomas A. Edison

“It always seems impossible until it’s done”

Nelson Mandela

“Never give up, I’m not giving up”

Lynne Bain

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Abstract

This study explores young people's views and experiences of Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) within three of the eight secondary schools in Neath Port Talbot (NPT), Wales. Using a multi-modal qualitative methodology, the research involved 27 participants aged 14–16 and was co-produced with two youth advisory groups from the NPT Youth Service. Data were collected through six participatory workshops and five semi-structured group interviews. Thematic analysis revealed three key themes: (1) Rights-based SRE, (2) Risk-focused SRE and (3) Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and other sexual and gender identities (LGBTQ+) Inclusive SRE.

Findings show that despite policy reforms, SRE remains largely adult-led, risk-focused, and disconnected from young people's lived realities. Participants reported limited opportunities to exercise voice and agency in shaping the content and delivery of SRE and expressed frustration over the absence of LGBTQ+ representation, as well as discussions of emotional intimacy and pleasure.

Many preferred external facilitators over teachers, citing reasons relating to their increased trust, expertise, and emotional safety. The study highlights the emotional impact of fear-based messaging and the need for inclusive, youth-led, and pleasure-informed approaches. It advocates for co-produced curricula, early intervention, and whole-school strategies that embed youth participation. These insights contribute to national discourse on RSE reform in Wales and offer actionable recommendations for policy and practice.

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Chapter One – Introduction

1.1 Chapter overview

Within academic and practitioner research, the concept of “youth voice” has been a significant part of education and policy-making since the inception of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1990). This declares that children who are “capable of forming their own views” have “the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting them” (UNCRC 1990, p.5). Consequently, there has been growing interest in research that listens to young people’s voices and explores their views and experiences of Sex and Relationships Education (SRE), as this informs policies and practices that directly impact them (Renold et al. 2023). When young people are given opportunities to influence school programmes through their voice and agency, they can feel empowered, valued, and believe their contributions matter (Perry 2017).

This thesis explores young people’s views and experiences of school-based SRE in Wales and contributes new research to the field. By co-producing the research with young people in Welsh educational settings, the study amplified their “voice” and “agency” and produced participant-led recommendations intended to inform the future development of SRE provision in Wales.

I outline the context in which my research project emerged, highlighting how my two decades of professional practice enabled me to provide young people in NPT with opportunities to participate in research exploring their views and lived experiences of school-based SRE. The chapter also explains how my involvement in youth participation work over the past ten years has strengthened young people's voices and supported their agency in influencing changes to local SRE services and programmes. Furthermore, it provides background on the development of SRE in Wales and discusses the relevance of this national context to my research.

Due to the changing terminology regarding SRE over the past two decades, throughout my thesis, based on the research and timeframe I will use the following terms: sex education (SE), then sex and relationships education (SRE), a term used in Wales when I initiated my project. The chapter then introduces the updated Welsh terminology, relationships and sexuality education (RSE), and applies this term where relevant. Likewise, I will use variations of the acronyms associated with individuals in society who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, LGBT and LGBTQ+ recognising that "Q" stands for queer and/or questioning identities and the "+" symbolically includes other sexual orientations and gender identities not otherwise captured. This terminology is commonly used by young people as it reflects a broader, evolving spectrum of identities (The Kite Trust 2024; Stonewall 2025).

Policy reviews in Wales have highlighted significant shortcomings in school-based SRE and the need for more research that incorporates young people's lived experiences (Estyn 2017; Children's Commissioner for Wales 2017). In response to these gaps, this study sought to involve young people directly in research to learn from their perspectives and enable them to shape future SRE provision within their local school settings. Like many projects concerned with young people's participation, the focus of my research is firmly grounded in Article 12 of the UNCRC, enabling young people's views to inform and shape future research, policies, and practice. For clarity, this study uses the term young people to refer to participants aged 14-18, an age range that aligns with the World Health

Organization's definition (WHO 2023). Additionally, bracketed signposts (e.g. 2.3) are used throughout this chapter to assist the reader in locating related sections

1.2 Research context and local concerns regarding young people's sexual health and SRE provision in Neath Port Talbot

Neath Port Talbot, a unitary authority in south-west Wales, is home to a considerable population of children and young people, with 24,657 residents aged 0-15 and 14,936 aged 16-24 forming a significant proportion of the local community. The area includes a mix of urban, rural and post-industrial communities, many of which experience socio-economic disadvantage, reflected in local and national indicators showing persistent challenges in health, education and wellbeing. Young people in NPT are also growing up in one of the least ethnically diverse local authorities in Wales, with 96.6% of residents identifying as White, and very small proportions of Asian, Mixed and Black groups, shaping the cultural context of their schooling experiences (StatsWales, 2026; Office for National Statistics 2024; 2025). These demographic features are important when considering youth voice, agency and participation in secondary schools, as they influence learners' identities, lived experiences and the structural inequalities that affect how confidently they can participate in school life and engage in RSE.

The sexual health of young people within Neath Port Talbot (NPT) has been of particular concern to local education and health professionals (Teachers, School Health Nurses and Public Health Practitioners) for the past two decades. This concern was largely prompted by early public health reports in Wales around 2000, which highlighted increasing rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unplanned teenage pregnancies in the area (Welsh Assembly Government 2000; Williams 2006).

In response, the local Public Health (PH) team in NPT established a sexual health strategy group to address these emerging issues. As a member of this group, I became aware that many professionals attending meetings between 2000-2001 believed the increase in STIs and unplanned teenage pregnancies might reflect gaps or inconsistencies in young people's access to timely, high-quality SRE

within their educational settings. However, discussions also recognised that the issue was more complex than simply “ignoring” information or not receiving it; professionals acknowledged that knowledge alone does not automatically translate into safer sexual behaviours. Young people’s sexual decision making is shaped by a range of intersecting factors; including confidence, peer norms, relationships, emotional readiness, and the broader social and cultural environment. Professionals in NPT strongly believed that appropriately timed SRE was fundamental to enabling young people to make informed decisions about their sexual health. This view is supported by research indicating that effective programmes are age-appropriate, interactive, begin early, and adapt responsively to young people’s needs (Pound et al. 2017; Sex Education Forum 2022; Rodríguez-García et al. 2025; WHO and UNESCO 2023).

1.3 Professional background and positionality

Many education, health, and youth practitioners during this period (2000) had SRE included in their roles within their work settings and as a youth practitioner in NPT, I was no exception. I became aware of the concerns outlined above in my professional capacity and had a presence on the aforementioned sexual health strategy group in 2000 and many other local SRE groups over the past two decades in NPT. My SRE role within NPT local authority continues to the present day.

Over the past two decades I have worked both as a professional Public Health Practitioner (secondment as the manager of Sexual Health Improvement Services for young people from 2004-2008) and a Senior Youth practitioner, prior and post the secondment (Appendix A). Both roles required me to manage a young people’s SRE drop-in service called RADS (Relationship Advice Drop-in Service), which I established in partnership with NPT health, education, and youth services in 2001. This initiative was developed in response to the concerns outlined above and after extensive consultation with local young people, as described below.

Youth voice is fundamental to our Youth Service in NPT and to me as a youth practitioner. During 2000-2001 my role included working with a group of young

people recruited from local youth clubs for a health advisory group to support a member of the PH team in NPT to establish young people's views. These consultations focused on two key issues: (a) the increasing rates of STIs and unplanned teenage pregnancies in the area, and (b) the types of services young people needed to support their sexual health. The consultation included a series of group discussions and anonymous questionnaires to capture their perspectives. The youth advisory group, consisting of approximately 25 young people of diverse genders, aged 14-18, met weekly with me and a public health practitioner for around six weeks, and then monthly for approximately a year.

Consulting local young people on their views enabled me, as a youth practitioner, to uphold Article 12 of the UNCRC by ensuring their right to participate in decisions affecting them. This was my first consultation on sexual health services, which sparked a sustained professional and research interest in SRE provision and young people's sexual health. Since then, I have continued creating opportunities for young people to share their perspectives on SRE, observing how their lived experiences can inform agency development. This was evident in outcomes from my previous research projects and in the youth-led creation of the RADS service, highlighted below.

Consultation with the aforementioned youth advisory group also revealed their concerns about STI rates, unplanned teenage pregnancies, and the need for age-appropriate sexual health services. In response, the RADS service, still operational, was co-produced by local young people, the advisory group, myself and a colleague from NPT Public Health team, with organisational support and funding from the local Health Board.

Named by the youth advisory group, RADS provides young people with confidential access to information, advice, and barrier contraception in settings of their choice, such as youth clubs, mobile units, and schools, at convenient times, delivered by trained youth practitioners. The service also supports access to GPs, pharmacies, and secondary sexual health services (e.g. GUM - Genitourinary Medicine clinics), with youth practitioner assistance. Over the past two decades, RADS has provided a platform for young people to engage in ongoing

consultation and ethically approved research. For example, in 2003, I conducted a study with RADS users to explore perceptions of sex education (Fry 2003). This research used questionnaires to collect qualitative and quantitative data from 19 participants aged 11-16 and formed part of my unpublished BA (Hons) dissertation at the University of Wales College, Newport. A RADS advisory group (aged 14-17) played a key role in my 2003 research by advising on methodology, piloting the questionnaire, and sharing experiences of SRE in schools. Their involvement ensured the study was youth-informed and aligned with participatory principles. Although not exhaustive, findings highlighted major gaps: limited SRE lessons, omission of topics such as LGBTQ+ relationships, pregnancy, and STIs, poor-quality resources (e.g. condom demonstrators), and delivery by staff lacking confidence in teaching SRE.

Insights from young people's experiences of SRE led to further local research, including a 2007 service evaluation of SRE delivered by Neath Port Talbot Youth Service practitioners (Fry 2007). Conducted as part of my unpublished Master of Public Health dissertation, this study used questionnaires to collect qualitative and quantitative data from 100 participants, aiming to assess whether practitioners contributed to effective SRE programmes to reduce teenage pregnancies. Simultaneously, I established a local SRE practitioners' group to consult education, health, and youth professionals on addressing concerns raised by young people in 2003.

In 2007, findings from both research projects were reviewed by the RADS advisory group and the NPT SRE practitioners' group. Both agreed to establish a professional SRE task-and-finish group, comprising education, youth service, and health leads, which I convened as a Public Health Practitioner. The group aimed to review school-based SRE and develop a plan to address identified gaps. Consequently, Public Health partners funded the development of a collaborative whole-school approach¹ (WSA) to SRE, integrating curriculum, policy, staff

¹ A whole-school approach to RSE in Wales means that Relationships and Sexuality Education is embedded across the school's curriculum, culture, policies and learning environment, creating safe, inclusive and empowering conditions for all learners. It requires a consistent, developmentally appropriate programme aligned with the statutory RSE Code and delivered as a cross-curricular responsibility across the whole school (Welsh Government 2021).

training, environment, and community links to ensure consistent, sustainable change, an approach that was later formally recognised within both international and national guidance (UNESCO 2023; Welsh Government 2021).

Drawing on findings from the above research and the work of the SRE task-and-finish group, a new programme, A Teaching Guide for SRE, Key Stage 3, Years 7-9, was introduced in local schools in 2014. The guide includes classroom activities, exercises, discussion prompts, and assessments designed to engage learners and support their understanding of SRE (Appendix B). The pack also includes supplementary resources to enhance learning and reflect young people's lived experiences. Each lesson provides clear delivery timescales (Years 7-9), defined aims and objectives, facilitator notes, structured plans, and required materials (e.g. worksheets, videos). A signposting section directs learners to local sexual health and support services (e.g. RADS, GUM clinics, GP surgeries, pharmacies, LGBTQ+ services). Importantly, all topics and themes were chosen by the RADS advisory group and piloted by NPT Youth Council to ensure relevance to young people's experiences.

The pilot group recommended annual consultation with young people to ensure ongoing participation, while the RADS advisory group advocated a five-year review to confirm full delivery by Year 9, identify issues, and maintain relevance. The pack was formally signed off in February 2014 by both the pilot group and Heads of Service for Education, Youth Service, and Health. All professionals using the pack, teachers, nurses, and youth practitioners, received training delivered by me to ensure effective implementation. This training enabled NPT Local Authority to apply collaborative action to improve the SRE curriculum and meet the needs of young people, staff, and the wider community.

Despite the introduction of the 2014 SRE programme, its relevance and effectiveness from young people's perspectives have not been evaluated. Consequently, their current views, experiences, and understanding of the programme, and the extent to which its pedagogical approaches reflect their lived realities, remain unclear. This gap is significant given persistent evidence of a disconnect between SRE provision and young people's experiences (Renold and

McGeeney 2017a; Children's Commissioner for Wales 2017). Research across Wales has consistently shown that young people want more relevant, inclusive, timely, and participatory SRE, and that their perspectives are often overlooked in curriculum design and delivery (Children's Commissioner for Wales 2017; Estyn 2017; Children in Wales 2019). International literature echoes this pattern, highlighting that SRE effectiveness depends on meaningful youth participation, contextual relevance, and alignment with young people's lived experiences (UNESCO 2018; Pound et al. 2017). Therefore, through my current Professional Doctorate research, I sought to establish whether youth voice remains visible within school settings, to examine the extent to which opportunities for agency have continued since 2014, and to identify the participatory methods, programmes, or resources that have supported young people's involvement in shaping SRE.

1.4 The wider policy context and youth voice in SRE

The role of young people's voice in shaping SRE has been widely debated at both public and policy levels (Ollis et al. 2019a). However, these debates have often been overshadowed by a dominant focus on risk, such as STIs, pregnancy, and abortion, leading to risk-driven SRE programmes for young people (Lamb et al. 2016; Fine et al. 2015). Such programmes can inadvertently convey that sex is primarily a risk to be avoided (Koepsel 2016), positioning young people as passive recipients rather than active contributors (Allen and Rasmussen 2017)

In response, a growing body of literature advocates for reimagining SRE to foreground young people's perspectives and foster meaningful participation in policy and practice (Mannay et al. 2018; Welsh Government 2016). This includes co-producing programmes that are fun, interactive, safe, and inclusive (Renold and Timperley 2024) and adopting sex-positive approaches that promote healthy relationships, gender equality, and informed choices (UNESCO 2025).

The Welsh Government's 2010 SRE guidance situated SRE within the UNCRC, highlighting children's rights to access education and health services, be heard, and participate in decisions affecting them. Similarly, the WHO (2010)

emphasises that sexuality education should begin in childhood and progressively support healthy sexual development by equipping young people with the knowledge, skills, and values needed for safe and fulfilling relationships. The WHO also affirms that young people have a right to comprehensive SRE and should be involved in its design and delivery through participatory consultation. While such consultation aligns with national and international human rights frameworks and is considered good policy-making practice (Bragg 2010), it is not without limitations and can become tokenistic (Hart 1992; Lundy 2018).

More recently, the Welsh Government's review of SRE, undertaken in 2017 by an expert panel (of which I was a member), established that substantial improvements are needed to meet the needs of children and young people in Wales. This role further positions me within this research as both a practitioner and policy contributor, informing my understanding of the systemic challenges and opportunities for youth engagement in SRE. The review highlighted that current SRE provision fails to reflect or respond to young people's lived realities, creating a significant gap between their experiences and school-based learning (Renold and McGeeney 2017a).

The expert panel also determined that both the law and guidance on SRE were obsolete; that provision in primary and secondary schools was limited, often inadequately resourced, with little consideration given to rights, gender, sexual equalities, emotions, and relationships; and that SRE was given low status in schools, resulting in inconsistent and unequal provision (Renold and McGeeney 2017a). Moreover, the report argues that young people were not included on the SRE review panel, neither were they consulted with.

This research, therefore, has provided me with a fundamental opportunity to address a research gap in Wales by providing young people with opportunities to articulate their views regarding SRE, listening to them, learning from and reimagining SRE with them to meet their needs (Quinlivan 2018a; Coll 2018; Renold 2018; Renold and McGeeney 2017a). Furthermore, the findings from this study will enable professionals in NPT to implement changes to their participation strategy specifically relating to SRE, to ensure that: a) it continues to enhance the

well-being and safety of young people and correlates with their lived experiences; and b) it works towards addressing the additional gaps outlined by the expert panel, which have informed the new SRE, now renamed RSE for Wales.

Developed in parallel with this research, the new RSE for Wales represents a fundamental shift from previous practice. It introduces a broader, fully inclusive curriculum and enables children and young people to build understanding progressively throughout their education. This approach is guided by the statutory RSE Code and accompanying Guidance (Welsh Government 2022a; Children's Commissioner for Wales 2023). The RSE Code forms part of the Welsh Government's 2022 Curriculum for Wales, embedding statutory RSE for all children aged 3-16. The Code sets out mandatory requirements for schools and other education settings, including maintained nurseries, funded non-maintained nursery providers, Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), and local authorities. It specifies what should be taught and when, ensuring that content is developmentally appropriate. The Code emphasises a rights-based, inclusive approach and provides clear expectations for educators to design programmes that promote equity, safety, and empowerment (Welsh Government 2022a).

By providing clear expectations and practical guidance, the Code supports educators to design needs-led programmes that integrate across the six AoLEs, from humanities and expressive arts to science and technology, while promoting principles of equity, safety, and empowerment (Welsh Government 2022a). Against this backdrop, my research is timely and distinctive: it offers local practitioners in NPT an opportunity to align their practice with these statutory requirements while embedding young people's voices at the heart of RSE provision. A detailed appraisal of the Expert Panel's findings and the statutory RSE Code is provided in Chapter Two (2.4).

Although national policy reviews have highlighted significant shortcomings in SRE provision in Wales (e.g. Estyn 2017; Children's Commissioner for Wales 2017), there remains a clear absence of empirical research that examines young people's lived experiences of SRE at a local authority level, including within NPT. Existing evidence consistently identifies a disconnect between young people's

realities and the SRE they receive (Renold and McGeeney 2017a; Children in Wales 2019), yet no participatory, youth-centred research has explored how these issues manifest in local school settings or how young people themselves believe SRE could be improved. This lack of locally grounded, youth-informed evidence represents a significant research gap. The present study directly addresses this gap by engaging young people in NPT to evaluate and reimagine school-based SRE provision from their own perspectives.

1.5 Research aims and questions

Based on the literature review and the research gaps identified in Wales (see Chapter 2.10), this study aimed to explore young people's views, experiences, and understanding of the current SRE programme within their school settings. Central to the study was a commitment to pupil "voice" and the empowerment of young people to exercise their agency in shaping the future design and delivery of RSE in their schools (Archer 2003; Renold et al. 2024; UNESCO 2023; Children's Commissioner for Wales 2022, 2023). In addition, the study was co-produced with two youth advisory groups, engaging young people as active partners in the participatory research process and ensuring that decisions about the design, focus, and methods were informed by their lived experiences. This commitment to co-production and youth voice reflects gaps highlighted by the Expert Panel (Renold and McGeeney 2017b) and the Children's Commissioner for Wales (Holland 2017a) and aligns with Welsh Government policy and the statutory RSE Code, which emphasise meaningful youth participation in shaping inclusive, rights-based RSE provision (Allen 2005a; Welsh Government 2019). Together, these foundations inform the research aims and questions outlined below.

However, to ensure methodological clarity and accurate interpretation of findings, it is important to distinguish between young people's views and experiences, as these concepts underpin the research questions below (Denzin and Lincoln 2005; Levitt 2024). In this study, views refer to the opinions or beliefs that young people hold about SRE, while experiences relate to the events or situations they have encountered within their school-based SRE provision (Levitt 2024). Although

views may be shaped by personal experiences, they are not synonymous. For example, two young people may hold different views about SRE despite having had similar personal experiences, such as attending the same lesson, if one felt the content was inclusive and relevant while the other did not, perhaps due to their sexuality or cultural background.

The aim of the study, informed by both the literature and contemporary RSE policy guidance, led to the following research questions, which are addressed throughout this thesis:

1. What are young people's views and experience of how sex and relationships education is provided in their school?
2. What opportunities have young people had to exercise their "voice" and "agency" regarding sex and relationships education in their school?
3. From young people's perspectives, how can sex and relationships education be improved (e.g. content and pedagogy)?

To support these aims, this study is underpinned by a rights-based and participatory conceptual framework grounded in the UNCRC, particularly Article 12, which positions young people as rights-holders with entitlements to express their views and influence decisions affecting them. Drawing together literature on youth voice, agency, relational pedagogy, and LGBTQ+ inclusive SRE, the framework conceptualises how structures (such as policies and timetabling) pedagogy, and curriculum content interact to shape young people's experiences of SRE within school settings. It therefore guides the design of the research, the participatory methodology adopted, and the interpretation of findings throughout the thesis.

1.6 Summary

This chapter established the foundation for the study by outlining its context, rationale, and aims. It introduced the significance of youth voice within Article 12 of the UNCRC and explained why evaluating SRE from young people's perspectives is critical. The discussion traced local concerns in NPT, the

development of initiatives such as RADS, and my professional role in shaping participatory approaches to SRE. It also situated the research within the Welsh policy landscape, highlighting systemic gaps identified by the 2017 expert panel and the shift to statutory RSE under the Curriculum for Wales. These elements collectively inform the research questions and underpin the participatory methodology adopted in this thesis. The chapter now concludes by outlining the structure of the thesis and providing a summary of each subsequent chapter.

1.7 Thesis outline

Chapter Two reviews the theoretical, empirical, and policy contexts informing the study. It examines key literature on youth voice, participatory research, and young people's views and experiences of SRE, identifies gaps within the Welsh and wider research landscape, and situates the study within national policy reform and international rights-based frameworks.

Chapter Three outlines the research design and methodology, explaining the study's paradigm, my positionality, and the rationale for a multi-modal, four-phase approach. It addresses ethical issues, including consent, confidentiality, and safeguarding, and demonstrates how the rights-based, participatory, and relational framework introduced in Chapter One informs the study's methodological and reflexive practices.

Chapters Four, Five, and Six present the research findings, organised around three core themes that emerged from the data: (1) Rights-based SRE, (2) Risk-focused SRE and (3) LGBTQ+ Inclusive SRE. Each chapter examines participants' views and experiences in relation to these themes and considers their implications for practice.

Chapter Seven brings together the key conclusions, showing how the findings address the research questions and contribute to the field of SRE. It outlines the study's limitations, implications for policy and practice, and recommendations for

future research. It concludes with a personal reflection on the research journey and its influence on my professional practice.

Chapter Two - Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I review the empirical and theoretical literature on youth “voice” and “agency” in relation to school-based sex and relationships education (SRE) in Wales. I begin by outlining the historical development of sex education in the UK prior to devolution, before examining how Wales has since established a distinct policy context for SRE. I then introduce the theoretical perspectives that inform this study, with particular attention to social constructionist understandings of voice and agency. Following this, I review studies exploring young people’s views and experiences of SRE, alongside wider academic debates on youth participation within education. The chapter also distinguishes between “voice” as a policy discourse concept and “agency” as a sociological construct, establishing the conceptual foundations used in this study. I then bring these strands together in a conceptual framework that guides the analysis in subsequent chapters. This study also explores the relationships between rights, voice and agency, examining both the points at which these concepts align and the tensions that emerge in practice. In doing so, it considers how institutional and relational conditions shape whether young people’s rights to participation translate into meaningful influence within SRE.

Literature was identified through Cardiff University's Library Search and key academic databases, including SAGE Journals, PubMed, Taylor and Francis

Online and Google Scholar. Search terms included "young people", "youth", "adolescent", "youth voice", "student voice", "agency", "participation", "co-production", "SRE", "RSE", "sex education", "relationships education" and "sexuality education". These terms were used in different combinations to identify literature relating to young people's experiences, participation and influence within SRE/RSE contexts. Policy documents were sourced through Google Scholar and Welsh Government bodies. Sources were selected for their relevance to Wales and their theoretical or empirical contribution, with international SRE/RSE research, including school-based studies, incorporated where this offered important conceptual or comparative insight.

This literature review adopts a narrative approach with systematic elements, ensuring a transparent and structured process for the identification and selection of sources. Inclusion criteria focused on literature that addressed youth voice, agency and SRE/RSE within educational contexts, with priority given to Welsh and UK-based research, alongside key international studies where these contributed relevant conceptual insights. Sources were excluded where they were not directly relevant to the focus of the study or did not provide sufficient theoretical or empirical depth. While quantitative studies were considered during the literature search process, the review primarily draws on qualitative, participatory and mixed-methods research because these approaches provide richer insight into young people's experiences, perceptions, voice and agency within SRE. The literature was analysed thematically and conceptually, with particular attention to how youth voice and agency are defined, interpreted and enacted within SRE and wider educational contexts. The studies drawn upon within this review reflect a range of methodological approaches, including qualitative interview and focus-group studies, participatory and co-produced research with young people, systematic reviews, and policy and conceptual analyses. Where relevant, attention is given to these methodological approaches to support critical engagement with the evidence base and to contextualise the findings presented. This analytical process informed the development of the conceptual framework that guides the analysis in subsequent chapters.

2.2 Setting the scene: a brief history of school-based sex education in the UK

Over the past two decades in NPT, professionals in both formal and informal education settings, including teachers, nurses, and youth practitioners, have used various terms to describe sex education. These include sex ed, sex and relationships education, sexual health, reproductive health, personal and social relationships, health and relationships education, and sexuality education. Such variation reflects broader trends in the academic literature, where terminology is shown to shift across time, sectors, and political contexts (Rasmussen and Allen 2016; Robinson and Davies 2018).

However, earlier references to “sex education” in the UK during the 19th century centered on publications produced for parents to help educate their children (Hall 2004). Very little formal sex education occurred in schools before the Second World War, with much of what was taught during this time, focusing on hygiene, birth rates and sexual abstinence, until the rise in STI’s following mass movements of people after the Second World War (Hampshire 2005; Reiss 2019). This resulted in the Government taking renewed interest in school-based sex education on the prevention of STIs and resulted in the publication of a health education handbook in 1956. This handbook failed to address the human reproductive systems (Davies 2008). In addition, sex education lessons in schools during the 1950s and 1960s became an element of the biology curriculum, delivered as part of the teaching of human reproduction with an emphasis on contraception (Pilcher 2005). Nonetheless, anecdotal evidence suggests much sex education occurred euphemistically through descriptions of rabbits and pollination of flowers (Reiss 2019).

The introduction of the oral contraceptive pill on the NHS in 1961, followed by wider access enabled through the NHS Family Planning Act 1967, introduced new dilemmas and contributed to shifts in sex education policy in the UK. During this period, the Family Planning Association (FPA) expanded training for health professionals, supporting teachers to up-skill in delivering contraceptive and sexual health education to young people (Thomson 1994). As Thorogood (2000)

observed, the early 1970s witnessed a “liberal educational consensus” characterised by a socially situated, rights-based approach to sex education (p.433). Drawing on feminist, anti-racist, and gay-liberationist philosophies, this approach marked a shift away from reproduction focused instruction toward a broader health education model emphasising “sexual responsibility through personal growth” (Thomson 1994, p.44). However, Thomson (1994) argued that this liberal consensus was short-lived, collapsing by 1976 due to political conflict between the Labour Government’s education and health departments.

During the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s, sex education became politically charged (Olva 2024). In her 1987 Conservative Party Conference speech, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher controversially stated; “Children who need to be taught to respect traditional moral values are being taught that they have an inalienable right to be gay” (Margaret Thatcher Foundation 2022, p.6). During the time of Thatcher’s speech, decision making around sex education was delegated to school governing bodies, with the guidance to promote “due regard to moral considerations and the value of family life” (Education Act 1986).

Moreover, the 1988 Local Government Act forbade Local Authorities, under Section 28 of the Act from “promoting homosexuality by teaching or publishing materials” (Local Government Act 1988, s.28). Consequently, sex education professionals were unable to address young people’s sex and relationships needs regarding LGBTQ+ issues within educational settings until the act was repealed in Scotland (2000) and the wider UK (2003). The Act did not extend to Northern Ireland (Education Northern Ireland Order 1996). Whilst the 1993 Education Act required sex education provisions to be mandatory in UK schools, the “right to withdraw” by parents nevertheless, remained. Thus, some young people would not have access to relevant SRE within schools.

The term “relationships” did not emerge within the context of sex education until 1999 when the UK government introduced the new Framework for personal and social health education (PSHE) and began using ‘sex and relationships education’ (SRE) (DfEE 2000). The Framework and subsequent guidance for England and Wales entitled “Sex and Relationships Education” (SRE) 2000 for head teachers,

teachers, and governors, went beyond the biological aspect of sex education. It included relationships to address personal, social, and intimate relationships (Monk 2001). Nevertheless, some argued that the (2000) guidance failed to consider the broader aspects of SRE that recognize sexual and gender diversity, due to its emphasis on heterosexual married relationships (Epstein et al. 2003).

Overall, the historical development of sex education in the UK reveals a pattern of heteronormative control and regulation. Programmes were often introduced in response to social concerns linked to negative sexual health outcomes. Notably, young people's perspectives were largely absent from policy discussions throughout this period.

2.3 SRE in the Welsh context of devolution

Since the devolution of education powers in 1999, Wales has developed a distinct approach to SRE, rooted in a social justice model that prioritises children's rights, equity, and well-being (Oerton and Pilgrim 2013; Children's Rights in Wales 2024). This marked a clear departure from England's "risk management" approach, as Wales embraced a rights-based framework formally adopted by the Welsh Government in 2000 and informed by the UNCRC and its 54 articles (Oerton and Pilgrim 2013). For more than two decades, this framework has underpinned policy and practice, shaping the educational landscape in Wales.

The UNCRC sets out how governments and organisations, such as local authorities, must protect and promote children's rights. For example, Article 12 affirms children's right to express their views on matters affecting them, including identity, protection from violence, health, and education (United Nations 1989). In 2001, Wales appointed the UK's first Children's Commissioner to champion young people's engagement and ensure that government and other organisations uphold their commitments to children's rights (Children's Commissioner for Wales 2022).

Building on this rights-based foundation, health and well-being initiatives further supported the approach. The Welsh Network of Healthy School Schemes (WNHSS), launched in 1999, promoted a whole-school model of health education,

positioning SRE as a key topic and reflecting Wales' earlier involvement in the European Network of Health Promoting Schools (Public Health Wales 2024). This whole-school health education framework complemented emerging statutory requirements for SRE, formalised in the 2002 Education Act.

The 2002 Act established SRE as a compulsory element of the basic curriculum in all maintained secondary schools. Guidance issued in 2002 required schools to develop an SRE policy and deliver education across six key areas: puberty, menstruation, contraception, abortion, safe sex practices, and STIs (Welsh Assembly Government 2002). Primary schools were also required to have an SRE policy or justify its absence. By 2003, SRE was compulsory for both primary and secondary schools, delivered through science and Personal and Social Education (PSE). The guidance addressed the needs of LGBT young people and required inclusive provision, while retaining parental withdrawal rights (Welsh Assembly Government 2003).

However, implementation challenges soon emerged. A 2007 Estyn review of the 2002 guidance identified strengths such as effective planning and practitioner confidence but also exposed a significant gap: the original guidance did not advocate consultation with learners, resulting in minimal youth involvement and leaving young people with little influence over SRE content or pedagogy (Estyn 2007). Estyn recommended national coordination of SRE, dissemination of best practice, staff training, and systematic consultation with young people (Estyn 2007). These findings informed subsequent policy updates and shaped the focus of this research on participatory approaches aimed at strengthening young people's voice and agency in the development of SRE provision. Similarly, the Welsh Government's Communities and Culture Committee review (2008) on domestic abuse called for urgent evaluation of SRE provision and teacher training. These findings prompted the Welsh Government to update its guidance in 2010.

The 2010 guidance marked a significant shift from earlier compliance-focused approaches. Unlike the 2003 guidance, which concentrated on curriculum delivery and inclusivity within science and PSE, the 2010 guidance positioned SRE firmly

within the framework of the UNCRC. This emphasised children and young people's entitlement to comprehensive and inclusive education on relationships and sexuality (Welsh Assembly Government 2010). It broadened the scope to include issues such as sexual exploitation, online safety, and sexual orientation, encouraged schools to adapt provision to meet pupil needs, and promoted partnership working with parents, carers, and the wider community to embed SRE within a whole-school approach (Welsh Assembly Government 2010). This progression was reinforced by the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011, which enshrined the UNCRC in legislation (Welsh Government 2011).

In practice, these principles translated into provision encompassing the emotional, physical, and social dimensions of healthy relationships, sexual health, and well-being (Welsh Government 2010; Estyn 2017). As outlined in the 2010 Welsh Government guidance, "Effective school SRE programmes help learners to develop the skills and knowledge appropriate to their age, understanding and development. Learners are enabled to make responsible decisions about their relationships, sexual health and well-being" (Welsh Government 2010, p. 3). Schools were positioned as central to achieving these outcomes. Collectively, these developments demonstrate Wales' shift from delivery-focused guidance to a holistic, rights-based model embedded in law.

2.4 The current status of SRE policy in Wales

In response to concerns about educational performance highlighted by the 2012 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, the Welsh Government commissioned Professor Graham Donaldson to review curriculum and assessment in Wales from the Foundation Phase to Key Stage 4. His report, *Successful Futures* (Donaldson 2015), proposed radical reforms informed by consultation with professionals, children and young people and international research. Central to these reforms was a new curriculum structured around six AoLEs: Expressive Arts; Health and Well-being; Humanities; Languages, Literacy and Communication; Mathematics and Numeracy; and Science and Technology (Donaldson 2015; Welsh Government 2017). SRE was designated as a cross-

cutting theme within all six AoLEs, reinforcing its integration across the curriculum and underpinning the significant changes implemented from September 2022 (Welsh Government 2020).

To support the development of the new national curriculum, the Welsh Government commissioned Estyn to review existing healthy relationships provision and established a SRE Expert Panel in 2017. Chaired by Professor EJ Renold, the panel was tasked with identifying issues and opportunities to improve current practice and inform the future development of SRE within the Health and Well-being AoLEs (Renold and McGeeney 2017b). Specifically, it was asked to provide recommendations on strengthening school-based SRE before the introduction of the new curriculum in 2022 and to advise on its long-term direction (Renold and McGeeney 2017b).

Two interconnected reports followed (Renold and McGeeney 2017a; 2017b). The first report (2017a) provided a summary of existing SRE practice in Wales, reaffirming concerns already raised in earlier reviews. It identified significant weaknesses, including outdated guidance, heteronormative content, limited attention to relationships and emotions, and insufficient teacher confidence and training opportunities. The second report (2017b) was a much more extensive synthesis of the evidence, offering detailed examples and research that underpinned the initial summary. It presented comprehensive recommendations for reform, advocating for a holistic, inclusive, and rights-based curriculum; strengthened professional learning; and the integration of SRE within the new Health and Well-being AoLE. Importantly, the reports highlighted that children begin learning about sexuality and relationships before starting school and from a variety of sources, including family, peers and media (Renold and McGeeney 2017a). Collectively, the reports concluded that the 2010 SRE guidance was outdated, overly biological, heteronormative, poorly resourced, and misaligned with young people's lived experiences. Teachers were found to lack confidence and adequate training, while SRE held a low status within school curricula (Renold and McGeeney 2017a, pp. 17-18). These findings are consistent with wider international evidence on young people's needs and experiences of SRE (2.8).

Building on these findings, Renold and McGeeney's Expert Panel report (2017b) set out detailed recommendations for strengthening SRE in Wales. Key proposals included renaming SRE as "sexuality and relationships education" and making it a statutory entitlement within the new national curriculum (p.9), producing legislation and guidance to support a "holistic, inclusive and adaptable living curriculum" (pp.9-12), ensuring SRE is regarded as equal to other AoLEs and embedded through a whole-school approach aligned with Welsh Government's 2010 SRE guidance and 2015 VAWDASV guidance (p.14), creating a certified initial teacher education pathway and a national professional learning programme (p.16), appointing a dedicated SRE lead in every school and local authority (p.17), and addressing research gaps concerning SRE provision, delivery contexts, aims, quality and teacher training (Renold and McGeeney 2017b, pp.9-19).

These reforms were accepted by the Cabinet Secretary for Education in May 2018 following the Expert Panel's recommendations (Welsh Government 2019), laying the foundations for reforming SRE in Wales from 2022 onwards. They also made SRE statutory for all learners aged 3-16 and adopted the term 'Relationships and Sexuality Education' (RSE) (Welsh Government 2019). The 2020 draft guidance went out for consultation, after which the Welsh Government spent a further two years developing and finalising the RSE Code and statutory Guidance, published in 2022 (Welsh Government 2022a). These documents now set out the principles and requirements for RSE in Wales. The final RSE Code and Guidance are underpinned by rights, equity, creativity, inclusivity, empowerment, protection and co-production, which shape five themes: relationships; sex, gender and sexuality; bodies and body image; sexual health and well-being; violence, safety and support; and rights and equity (Welsh Government 2022b). These themes align with UNESCO's International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education, particularly in their shared emphasis on rights, equity and inclusive learning (UNESCO 2018).

This study aligns with national policy priorities and ensures that reforms reflect young people's lived experiences. Youth voice is not only a guiding principle of

the new curriculum but also a methodological foundation of this research, underpinning the study's participatory and rights-based approach.

This approach is supported by guidance such as Estyn's Pupil Participation: A Best Practice Guide (Estyn 2016) and Welsh Government reforms, which advocate purposeful, child-centred participation embedded in decision-making (Renold and McGeeney 2017a).

2.5 Youth voice and participation in education and SRE: academic perspectives

This study is situated within a substantial body of research that foregrounds youth voice and participatory approaches in SRE. Scholars such as Allen (2001, 2005a, 2007, 2011), drawing primarily on qualitative research, and Renold et al. (2021) and Ollis et al. (2022a), using participatory and co-produced research with young people, advocate co-production where young people collaborate with adults to shape curriculum and research, and learner-led pedagogies in which learners' interests and experiences direct the learning process. Participatory studies, including Renold et al. (2021) and Quinlivan (2018a), using creative and arts-based methods with young people, demonstrate the value of creative and relational methods in amplifying young people's perspectives, while Coll et al. (2018), drawing on participatory research with young people, highlight how digital media, peer cultures and wider social narratives shape young people's engagement with sexual cultures. Across this work, scholars share a commitment to challenging tokenism and adult centred power relations.

Beyond SRE, wider education research also highlights the value of youth voice. Scholars argue that participatory practices enhance educational quality (Cook-Sather 2002; Keddie 2015; Myers 2019; Bragg 2021), ensure learning reflects young people's lived realities (Holdsworth 2000), and strengthen trust between educators and learners (Baroutsis et al. 2016). This broader literature reinforces the importance of authentic voice and influence in youth-centred educational practice.

A similar shift toward recognising young people as experts in their own lives is evident in international children's rights frameworks (UNICEF 2000) and contemporary scholarship promoting youth-led forums, peer education and co-produced lesson planning (Cook-Sather 2006; UNESCO 2023; Round 2024; King-Hill 2024a). However, the popularity of youth-voice initiatives has also prompted critical scrutiny. Scholars highlight that adult-led structures often limit young people's influence (Domínguez et al. 2022), while questions persist about whose voices are heard (Mannion 2013). Bakhtin (1981) critiques the assumption that "children's voice" represents a unified perspective, and Cruddas (2007) argues that terms such as "pupil voice" reinforce hierarchical relationships in which young people remain less powerful than teachers.

These critiques are echoed in SRE-specific research. Albury et al. (2013) show that although young people may be invited to express their views, they are not always listened to, and tokenistic consultation can erode trust. In SRE, scholars therefore emphasise relational pedagogy, centred on trust, respect and attentiveness to power dynamics, as essential for creating inclusive, participatory learning environments (Ollis et al. 2022; Bragg et al. 2022). Allen's work (2005a, 2011) further demonstrates that young people not only critique existing SRE but also propose youth-led alternatives, providing strong empirical support for co-produced SRE. Together, this research highlights a disconnect between policy commitments to youth voice and the limited influence young people experience within SRE in practice.

Holland (2017) strengthens this critique by showing that, even when young people are positioned as experts on their own lives, they are frequently excluded from decisions that affect them. Her work highlights the importance of examining not only whether young people are asked for their views, but whether the conditions exist for those views to shape practice. This insight reinforces the rationale for the present study, which seeks to foreground young people's perspectives on SRE in NPT local authority education settings and explore the institutional and pedagogical conditions that support or constrain their meaningful participation.

2.6 Conceptualising "voice" and "agency"

To interpret the challenges outlined above, it is important to clarify how this study understands the concepts of “voice” and “agency”. The concept of ‘children’s voices’ is well established within childhood studies and education research (Spyrou 2011) and in sexuality-education scholarship (Coll et al. 2018). Although often used interchangeably, the terms “voice” and “agency” have distinct meanings. “Voice” typically refers to a young person’s right to express their views and have those views heard, whereas “agency” refers to the point at which those views influence decisions or lead to action (Kellett 2019). Importantly, both concepts are rooted in rights-based policy frameworks that position participation as a fundamental principle of education. Voice is not simply about speaking; it involves power, representation, and whether views are genuinely considered (Renold et al. 2024).

Similarly, agency depends on the structures and opportunities that enable young people to act on their views; without such responsiveness, voice risks becoming tokenistic (Balfanz and Byrnes 2024). For instance, a young person may express discomfort with an aspect of SRE (voice), but unless the curriculum or classroom practice adapts in response, they have limited agency (Renold et al. 2024). The following subsections explore these concepts in greater depth before outlining how the study uses and applies them.

2.6.1 Academic literature “voice”

The concept of youth voice is widely examined in education, childhood studies and sexuality education research. Scholars highlight that voice is not a straightforward or transparent expression of a child’s inner truth, but a relational, contextual and co-constructed process shaped by social norms and power relations (Spyrou 2011; Facca et al. 2020). Adult-child hierarchies, institutional expectations and research or classroom settings all shape what young people feel able to say and how their contributions are interpreted. This challenges assumptions that simply asking young people for their views is sufficient. Broader education literature emphasises the value of authentic youth voice in improving educational quality, strengthening relationships and ensuring learning

reflects young people's lived experiences (Cook-Sather 2002; Keddie 2015; Myers 2019; Bragg 2021). However, scholars also highlight persistent tensions around tokenism, the selective inclusion of certain voices, and adult-driven agendas that can limit genuine influence (Mannion 2013; Domínguez et al. 2022). Bakhtin (1981) warns against treating "children's voice" as singular, while Cruddas (2007) argues that terms such as "pupil voice" risk reinforcing hierarchical norms that position adults as decision-makers and young people as less powerful.

Within sexuality-education research, youth voice has been central to participatory, co-produced and learner-led approaches (Allen 2001, 2005a, 2007, 2011; Renold et al. 2021; Ollis et al. 2022). Creative and relational methods, such as arts-based activities, participatory workshops and youth-led inquiry, have been shown to amplify young people's perspectives and redistribute power in productive ways (Quinlivan 2018; Renold et al. 2021). Nevertheless, research highlights that being asked for their views does not guarantee that young people are listened to. Albury et al. (2013) found that insincere consultation can devalue young people's contributions, damage trust and ultimately silence their voices. Collectively, the literature emphasises that voice is not merely about expression but about the relational and institutional conditions that make meaningful expression possible. This understanding informs how the study examines young people's participation in SRE. In this study, participation is understood as the process through which voice translates into agency, meaning the conditions that enable young people not only to express their views but also to have those views shape SRE practice.

2.6.2 Academic literature on "agency"

Agency is widely conceptualised in childhood studies and sociology as relational, contextual and enacted, rather than a fixed trait that young people possess. Robson and Klocker (2007) describe agency in terms of capacities and competencies, but practice-oriented scholars argue that agency becomes meaningful only when exercised in specific contexts (Bell 2012; Maxwell and Aggleton 2014). From this perspective, agency is something young people do, visible through actions, choices, refusals, negotiations and contributions within

social situations. Sociological theories further develop this view. Giddens (1984) conceptualises agency and structure as mutually constitutive, while Bourdieu (1977) highlights how agency is embedded within relational power dynamics and everyday practices. These approaches show that agency emerges through interaction with structural, cultural and institutional conditions, not outside of them.

Empirical studies in sexuality education illustrate these dynamics clearly. Research demonstrates that young people's agency can be constrained or enabled by school norms, teacher confidence, curriculum approaches and wider sociocultural expectations (Ollis et al. 2022b; Renold et al. 2024). Agency does not automatically follow from participation opportunities; it depends on whether young people can influence or shape decisions.

Participatory and creative methods have been particularly effective in making young people's agentic practices visible. These approaches enable learners to critique existing SRE, propose alternatives and contribute to decision-making (Bragg et al. 2022; Renold et al. 2024). Coll et al.'s (2018) participatory study shows how positioning young people as "knowledge actors" shifts them from passive recipients to active contributors who shape research aims and outcomes. At the same time, the study highlights structural barriers that limit agency within formal education contexts. Overall, the literature conceptualises agency as enacted, relational and context-dependent, emerging when institutional and pedagogical conditions enable young people to influence educational processes.

2.6.3 Policy discourse on "voice" and "agency"

Rights-based policy frameworks provide an important foundation for understanding how voice and agency are conceptualised in education. Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989) establishes young people's right to express their views in matters affecting them and for those views to be given due weight. Wales has taken a particularly strong rights-based approach, embedding the UNCRC into policy and legislation through mechanisms such as the Children's Commissioner for Wales (2001) and the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure (2011).

Participation models such as Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation have significantly influenced policy discourse by illustrating different degrees of youth involvement, from tokenism to shared decision-making. These models highlight that meaningful participation requires more than consultation: young people must have opportunities to influence outcomes. However, while policy consistently emphasises the importance of youth voice, it often assumes that influence (agency) will naturally follow. Research shows that structural and cultural barriers frequently prevent this translation, creating gaps between policy intention and lived experience. Policy discourse therefore provides a critical backdrop for this study, but it is the institutional and pedagogical conditions that determine whether voice leads to agency in practice.

2.6.4 How this study conceptualises and operationalises “voice” and “agency”

Drawing on academic and policy literature, this study conceptualises voice and agency as analytically distinct yet interconnected. Voice is treated as a policy-discourse concept concerned with young people's opportunities to express their views about SRE and to be heard within educational processes (Lundy 2007). It is understood as co-constructed and relational, shaped by the contexts and conditions that enable or constrain what young people feel able to say. In contrast, agency is positioned as a sociological concept, referring to young people's capacity to influence decisions, practices, and outcomes within SRE. Following practice oriented theorists, agency is conceptualised as something enacted, becoming visible through young people's actions, choices, negotiations, and contributions (Bell 2012; Maxwell and Aggleton 2014).

Operationally, this study examines: voice as the opportunities young people have to express views about SRE, its relevance, LGBTQ+ inclusivity, timing and pedagogical approach, and their perceptions of being listened to. Agency as the extent to which those views shape decision-making, influence school-based SRE, or inform future practice. This distinction enables the study to explore not only whether young people speak, but also whether their perspectives matter within

SRE. It provides a clear foundation for analysing how institutional, relational and curricular conditions shape young people's participation, and directly informs the conceptual framework (2.7), and the analysis presented in later chapters.

2.7 Conceptual framework for the study

This study is guided by a conceptual framework that brings together children's rights, youth voice, agency and power through a rights-based and participatory approach. Rooted in Article 12 of the UNCRC, the framework positions young people as rights-holders whose views should be expressed, heard and afforded influence (Lundy 2007). Voice is understood as relational and co-constructed within institutional conditions that can enable or restrict agency (Renold et al. 2024), while agency is conceptualised as something enacted through supportive structures rather than a fixed personal trait (Maxwell and Aggleton 2014). The framework incorporates three interconnected dimensions that shape young people's experiences of SRE: structures and governance (policies, leadership and institutional norms), pedagogical practice (teacher confidence, relational dynamics and emotional safety), and curriculum content (LGBTQ+ inclusivity, relevance and representation).

These dimensions interact to influence whether young people can participate meaningfully and exercise voice and agency. This framework informs the analysis by guiding how data are interpreted across these three dimensions and providing a consistent analytical framework for examining the extent to which young people's perspectives are expressed, heard and able to influence SRE practice.

While rights, voice and agency are closely related, the literature demonstrates that the relationship between them is neither straightforward nor automatic. A key area of convergence is that all three concepts position young people as active participants in matters affecting their lives rather than passive recipients of adult decisions. Rights-based frameworks such as the UNCRC establish young people's entitlement to participate, voice provides opportunities for those views to be expressed, and agency refers to the capacity for those views to influence decisions, practices and outcomes (Lundy 2007). Together, these concepts

support more democratic and participatory approaches to education and SRE (Lundy 2007; Renold et al. 2024).

However, important tensions also emerge. The existence of participation rights does not necessarily mean that young people have meaningful opportunities to exercise influence. Similarly, opportunities to express views can exist without those views leading to tangible changes in policy or practice. This creates a disconnect between voice and agency, where young people may be heard but not necessarily listened to in ways that shape decision-making (Lundy 2007; Mannion 2013). Such tensions are often linked to adult-child power relations within educational settings, where responsibility for curriculum design and decision-making ultimately remains with adults (Cruddas 2007). As a result, participation may be confined to consultation, with limited opportunities for young people's views to shape decisions or practice.

The literature therefore suggests that rights, voice and agency should not be viewed as interchangeable concepts. Rather, they represent interconnected but distinct dimensions of participation (Lundy 2007). Rights may create opportunities for voice, but agency depends on the extent to which institutions are willing to respond to, act upon and share power with young people (Holland 2017). Consequently, rights, voice and agency should be understood as overlapping but analytically distinct concepts rather than as a direct progression from participation to influence. This distinction is particularly important for the present study, which seeks to examine not only whether young people are given opportunities to express their views about SRE, but also the extent to which those views are able to influence practice.

2.8 Understanding young people's views on SRE

Building on the previous discussion of youth voice and agency, this section examines empirical evidence on how young people evaluate SRE, specifically its timing (when), content (what), and pedagogical approaches (how). By synthesising these perspectives, the section identifies persistent gaps between young people's lived experiences and current provision. These insights help to

shape the rationale and direction of this study in NPT local authority education settings.

2.8.1 When should SRE be introduced: young people's perspectives

Young people consistently report that SRE is introduced too late, a finding reflected in both UK-based studies and international research (Measor et al. 2000; Pound et al. 2017; Renold and McGeeney 2017b). Pound et al. (2016a) systematic review, which draws on studies from multiple countries, reinforces this as a global concern. Young people also emphasise the need to begin discussing relationships, sex, sexuality, and core safeguarding topics, such as consent, recognising sexual abuse, and grooming, at an earlier age (UNESCO 202 Renold and McGeeney 2017b). They also highlight that SRE lessons are too infrequent (Allen 2011), calling for regular, sequenced provision with opportunities to revisit key topics (e.g. unplanned pregnancy, consent, domestic abuse, sexting) over time to support consolidation and reflection (Brook 2017).

These views on timing align with international and national recommendations for developmentally appropriate, spiral curricula in SRE that build knowledge and skills progressively across year groups. Such approaches respond directly to young people's calls for earlier and more frequent provision by ensuring topics are revisited with increasing complexity as learners mature (UNESCO 2018; Sex Education Forum 2020). In Wales, Estyn (2017) inspection evidence indicates that SRE often begins too late and that provision is inconsistent, highlighting the need for earlier and continuous provision. The Welsh Government's RSE Code (2020) seeks to address these shortcomings by embedding RSE from early childhood within the Curriculum for Wales and mandating a sequenced, developmentally informed approach. Evidence suggests that this form of sequencing supports knowledge retention and skill development over time, addressing the gaps young people identify in current provision (UNESCO 2018; Sex Education Forum 2020; Welsh Government 2020).

Evidence suggests that delaying SRE can have significant implications for young people's wellbeing and safety (WHO 2023). Providing SRE early is critical for

safeguarding, as it equips children with the knowledge to recognise and report abuse, grooming, and coercion before they encounter risk situations (Advocates for Youth 2025). When SRE starts too late, young people often turn to informal sources such as peers, social media, or pornography, which can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and misinformation (Stonewall 2017; Formby and Donovan 2020). This reliance on unregulated content increases vulnerability to sexual exploitation and risk behaviours, as young people lack the foundational knowledge to make informed decisions (Brook 2017). Providing accurate, age-appropriate information early helps prevent these risks and supports informed, healthy choices throughout adolescence (UNESCO and UNFPA 2023).

2.8.2 What should SRE include: young people's views on content

Evidence suggests that young people consistently call for practical information and opportunities to develop relationship skills, including how to negotiate sexual consent (Pound et al. 2017; Bragg et al. 2021). Many do not believe current provision is comprehensive, requesting more teaching on rights and the law in a sex-positive environment rather than one framed primarily around risk, fear or moralism (Sundaram and Sauntson 2016; Brook 2017).

The absence of pleasure discourse in SRE has been widely critiqued, with scholars highlighting how prevention-led models focused on abstinence, STI avoidance, and unplanned pregnancy prevention, marginalise broader, affirmative understandings of sexuality (Fine 1988; Wright 1999; Reiss 2005; McGeeney and Kehily 2016; Ford et al. 2021; Allen 2024; King-Hill 2020a). In contrast, pleasure-inclusive approaches are increasingly recognised for fostering sexual agency, emotional wellbeing, and relational health (Mark et al. 2021; Van Ditzhuijzen and Overeem 2025). These approaches challenge risk-focused narratives and support young people's rights to safe, informed, and affirming sexual experiences (WHO 2022; UNESCO 2024). Moralistic and heteronormative framings fail to reflect the diverse, lived experiences of young people, fuelling calls for holistic, LGBTQ+ inclusive, and sex-positive SRE (Renold and McGeeney 2017b; Setty 2023; Allen 2024a).

Young people also want clear guidance on where to access sexual health services and trusted organisations, alongside accurate information on contraception, body literacy, peer pressure, and self-esteem (Girlguiding 2018; Griffiths 2019; Patterson et al. 2019; McMellar et al. 2019). Many feel their knowledge of LGBTQ+ issues is limited and does not reflect lived realities; some describe current content as inadequate (Terrence Higgins Trust 2016).

This concern is echoed in Wales: a Stonewall Cymru survey (2017) reports that three in five young people had never been taught about LGBTQ+ issues in school, and nearly half of LGBTQ+ young people (45%), including 64% of trans young people, experienced bullying because of their identity. Where LGBTQ+ inclusive SRE is present, young people report feeling safer, with reduced bullying and victimisation (Toomey et al. 2011; Proulx et al. 2019).

Inadequate or exclusionary content often pushes young people to seek information elsewhere, particularly online, with mixed consequences. Young people learn about sex and relationships both directly and indirectly from friends, family, teachers, and increasingly social media and pornography (Formby and Donovan 2020; Still 2022). In the absence of inclusive SRE, online sources can introduce misinformation or harmful content (Stonewall 2017; The Trevor Project 2024). These experiences are frequently reported as having more negative impacts than formal SRE (Finkelhor et al. 2024), highlighting the importance of high-quality school-based SRE to help young people critically make sense of what they encounter online.

2.8.3 How should SRE be taught: young people's views on pedagogical approaches

Young people consistently express preferences for SRE that is LGBTQ+ inclusive, interactive, and provided by confident, well-trained educators rather than embarrassed or underprepared teachers, with studies showing that young people often feel awkward, embarrassed, or reluctant to engage when SRE is provided by teachers who lack confidence or expertise (Pound et al. 2016).

International studies show that many young people feel awkward, embarrassed, or uncomfortable during SRE lessons facilitated by their teachers, citing concerns about trust, confidentiality, and teachers' lack of confidence and expertise (Pound et al. 2016). Teachers themselves often report feeling underprepared and embarrassed, which undermines engagement and trust (Measor et al. 2000; Pound et al. 2016; Fox and Riley 2025).

Effective pedagogical practice in inclusive, pleasure-informed SRE requires educators who are confident, competent, and emotionally attuned. Research highlights the need for professional development that equips staff to address sensitive topics with accuracy, sensitivity, and respect (Hirst 2008; Fox and Riley 2025). Young people emphasise that SRE pedagogy should be fun, participatory, and LGBTQ+ inclusive, and that they are ready to debate and learn about their own and others' gender, sexuality, and relationships (Allen 2011; Quinlivan 2018; Ollis et al. 2019c)

In light of robust evidence of unmet needs in current SRE provision (Terrence Higgins Trust 2016; Pound et al. 2016; Stonewall 2017), and consistent critiques that SRE frequently fails to reflect young people's lived experiences (Allen 2011; Quinlivan 2018), a persistent gap remains between the pedagogical approaches young people prefer and those schools believe they require (Allen 2011). A comprehensive examination of inclusive education in international human rights law positions it as a rights-based imperative grounded in Article 24 of the UNCRC, emphasising the need for systemic reform, anti-discrimination measures, empowerment, and participatory decision-making to ensure equal access and achievement (de Beco et al. 2019). Likewise, Thomas and Aggleton (2016) argue that young people are rarely involved in meaningful discussions about SRE, with adults typically determining content, resulting in provision that does not meet young people's needs.

Benham-Clarke et al. (2022) observe limited co-development or youth involvement in planning and evaluation, which weakens relevance and adversely impacts outcomes. Action is therefore needed to ensure young people have genuine opportunities to participate and influence SRE pedagogical design and

practice (Holland 2010). Some scholars argue that SRE often adopts a damage limitation approach, framed around risk behaviours, which can undermine young people's agency, especially where they are positioned as objects of concern, victims, or vulnerable (Hall 2009; Lewis and Knijn, 2002; Renold and Ringrose 2008). As noted, in Wales, inspection evidence suggests children and young people have limited opportunity to exercise voice and agency regarding SRE programmes (Estyn 2017).

Re-orienting pedagogical practice towards participatory, rights-based practice is crucial if SRE is to serve its intended purpose. Inequalities will persist unless young people are given structured opportunities to influence SRE programmes that reflect their lived experiences through meaningful participation. Young people should be central to planning and decision-making about their SRE pedagogy and curriculum design (Blake and Aggleton 2017). Improvements are most likely when we respond to the needs of the target audience (Forrest et al. 2004) and establish young people's preferences (Measor et al. 2000; Strange et al. 2004). LGBTQ+ Inclusive SRE is associated with positive outcomes, including reduced bullying for LGBTQ+ young people and improved wellbeing (Stonewall 2017). Schools therefore play a vital role in providing pedagogically safe spaces to learn and discuss issues that affect young people (Pound et al. 2017; Renold et al. 2021a; Welsh Government 2020).

The literature highlights persistent gaps in SRE provision in Wales, especially around LGBTQ+ inclusivity, relevance, and youth participation. These gaps directly inform the focus of this study, which explores young people's views and experiences of SRE in NPT local authority education settings and examines how their voice and agency can shape future provision. This chapter therefore establishes the rationale for investigating how young people themselves understand meaningful participation in SRE and how their insights can inform future curriculum design and pedagogical practice.

2.9 Summary and research gap

Despite extensive policy reform and a growing international evidence base emphasising youth voice and agency in SRE, a clear gap remains in the Welsh research landscape. Although national reviews such as Renold and McGeeney (2017a; 2017b) incorporated some insights from young people through a one-off creative consultation, young people were not part of the expert panel, and the reviews did not examine their lived experiences within local authority contexts. In addition to these national reviews, participatory and creative rights-based projects in Wales such as Renold's NSPCC funded Boys and Girls Speak Out study (Renold 2013) and the Unboxing/AGENDA work (Cardiff University and NSPCC 2016; NSPCC 2019) have generated valuable insights into young people's gendered and sexual cultures and developed innovative youth-led creative methodologies. However, while these projects centre young people's perspectives, they were not designed to examine young people's views and experiences of SRE within specific local authority school systems, nor do they analyse how youth voice and agency shape SRE pedagogy within particular education settings. These findings also highlight important tensions between rights, voice and agency. Although young people are increasingly recognised within policy as rights-holders with a legitimate voice in educational matters, evidence suggests that opportunities for participation do not always result in meaningful influence over SRE provision (Lundy 2007). This reflects a broader disconnect between being consulted and having the power to shape decisions, highlighting the continuing significance of institutional power relations within educational settings (Cruddas 2007).

Existing literature consistently shows that young people in Wales feel their voices are marginalised, that SRE provision does not reflect their needs or lived realities, and that opportunities to influence curriculum content or pedagogy remain limited (Estyn 2007). Collectively, these gaps highlight the need for local, in-depth research that engages young people as co-constructors of knowledge and practice. To address this gap, this study investigates how young people in NPT understand and experience SRE, the opportunities they have had to exercise voice and agency within school-based provision, and the improvements they believe are needed in SRE content and pedagogy. These aims are explored through my research questions (1.5).

Chapter Three - Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research design and methodology. It introduces the research paradigm, explains the rationale for adopting qualitative, participatory methods, and reflects on my positionality as an insider researcher. The chapter then details the methodological framework, describing how reflexivity informed each stage of the study and how participants and research sites were accessed and recruited. The chapter also provides an overview of the multi-method, four-phase design, comprising participatory workshops, creative methods, semi-structured group interviews, and the advisory and pilot phases. These methodological choices operationalise the rights-based, participatory framework outlined in Chapter Two. The chapter concludes by summarising the key ethical considerations addressed throughout the study.

3.2 Research paradigm and methodological rationale

This study aimed to explore young people's views, experiences, and understanding of their current SRE provision within school settings. These research questions align with an interpretivist paradigm, which seeks to

understand how individuals construct meaning from their lived experiences (Creswell 2014; Mason 2005). An interpretivist position assumes that reality is subjective, context-dependent, and shaped through social interaction, making it appropriate for capturing the complexity of young people's perspectives. A qualitative approach was therefore essential, as quantitative or survey-based designs would have restricted responses to predefined categories and limited the depth required for this study (Bryman 2016).

Adopting an interpretivist paradigm aligned with the use of qualitative, participatory methods such as workshops and group interviews, which enabled the generation of context-rich insights and supported meaningful youth involvement (Creswell 2014). This decision was further informed by literature emphasising children and young people's voice and agency, reinforcing the value of flexible, participatory approaches that allow young people to shape the research process and contribute directly to thinking about their experiences of SRE provision.

My interpretivist paradigm is grounded in a constructionist ontological position, which assumes that reality is socially produced and continually negotiated through interaction (Berger and Luckmann 1966). This study therefore views young people's accounts not as objective "facts" but as situated interpretations shaped by school cultures, peer relationships, and wider social contexts. Epistemologically, the research assumes that knowledge is co-constructed between researcher and participants through dialogue, reflection, and shared meaning-making (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Denzin 1989). These assumptions underpin the participatory and dialogic approaches used, positioning young people as active contributors rather than passive respondents (Denzin and Lincoln 2011).

Interpretive approaches involve limitations such as smaller sample sizes and reduced generalisability. However, these necessary compromises are justified by the need to understand the contextual and relational nature of SRE delivery and young people's lived realities, dimensions not accessible through positivist or quantitative paradigms that prioritise measurement over meaning (Denzin and

Lincoln 2011; Bryman 2016). The depth and richness afforded by interpretivism align with the aim of foregrounding young people's voices in a field where their perspectives have often been marginalised.

Finally, the limited availability of qualitative, participatory research on SRE in Wales further supports the adoption of an interpretivist, youth-centred methodology. This approach aligns with the values of the Curriculum for Wales and the RSE Code, which emphasise learner voice, agency, and contextualised learning experiences (Welsh Government 2022a). By centering young people's meaning-making, this study responds to a clear gap in the literature and produces insights that quantitative methods could not generate. These philosophical commitments shape both the choice of methods and the participatory research design outlined in Chapter Three. This interpretivist and participatory approach directly supports answering the research questions by enabling in-depth exploration of young people's experiences and perspectives.

3.3 Research design and data collection methods

This study adopts a qualitative co-production research design, grounded in community-based participatory methods within school settings. This approach enabled close engagement with young people as active contributors, allowing their perceptions, experiences, and values to shape the research process and inform the development of future SRE provision. The design centred on face-to-face dialogue through semi-structured group interviews and creative participatory workshops, which supported young people to express their views in multiple ways and participate at a level that felt comfortable to them. This participatory, multi-modal approach was chosen to generate rich, contextually situated data capable of addressing the research questions effectively (De Vaus 2001). It aligned with methodological perspectives that recognise qualitative enquiry as a flexible and iterative process informed by researcher participant interaction (Mason 2005). This approach reflects practitioner-led RSE literature that emphasises the need to animate learning and discussion through creative and dialogic methods to reduce discomfort and support meaningful engagement with sensitive topics (Renold and Timperley 2024).

3.4 Researcher positionality: Insider status and ethical presence

As an insider researcher working within the local authority, this position afforded practical advantages. I was familiar with schools' organisational cultures, internal dynamics and my own existing professional relationships with staff and settings, which facilitated access, rapport building and the recruitment of schools and youth groups. This familiarity also enabled realistic planning around logistical constraints, including limited staff availability, timetable pressures and the practicalities of working in school environments.

However, my insider status also introduced potential challenges. In particular, I was aware that staff delivering SRE might perceive the research as a judgement of their practice rather than an opportunity to enhance provision. To address this, I met with staff prior to fieldwork to explain the study's aims, emphasise its developmental purpose, and reassure them that youth participation would support both the research and their own professional practice (Mannay et al. 2018).

These early discussions were essential in negotiating key ethical considerations, particularly ensuring the confidentiality of young people while also safeguarding the privacy of staff and participating schools (3.9.3;3.9.4), alongside maintaining transparency and clear expectations around the study's findings. These discussions also supported the identification of appropriate and private spaces for conducting creative workshops, helping to create a safe and comfortable research environment for participants (Ollis et al. 2019a; 2019b).

Holding an insider role required ongoing reflexivity, particularly regarding power dynamics and existing relationships that could influence participation. I continued to reinforce clarity around the study's purpose without overstating potential benefits, ensuring participants understood the voluntary nature of their involvement and the limits of what the research could offer (3.10.3; 3.10.4). Aware that my professional position could create a sense of obligation or shape responses, I maintained clear boundaries and acknowledged my dual role when appropriate. These practices supported participant agency, managed relational

dynamics, and upheld ethical standards throughout the research. I also recognised that my responsibility for supporting schools and promoting youth voice shaped the lens through which I approached the study, influencing what I attended to in the field and the sensitivity with which I navigated discussions about SRE. Positioning myself as both a practitioner and researcher meant that my epistemological stance was closely aligned with interpretivism, recognising that knowledge is co-constructed through interaction and shaped by my professional experiences and assumptions. My dual role therefore influenced not only access and rapport, but also how meaning was interpreted throughout the research process.

3.4.1 Power, group dynamics and psychological safety in youth group interviews

Group interviews with young people are shaped by complex and shifting power relations between participants, peers, and adult figures. As Bragg (2007) highlights, participation is mediated not simply by opportunity but by authority, peer judgement, and perceived consequences of speaking. This reflects wider youth research which emphasises that power operates relationally and shapes both what is expressed and what remains unspoken (Punch 2002; Alderson and Morrow 2020). Within school contexts, where authority structures routinely regulate behaviour, participants' contributions must therefore be understood as situated and relational rather than neutral or uninfluenced.

Within this context, psychological safety is central to participant engagement, referring to the extent to which individuals feel able to express themselves without fear of embarrassment or negative repercussions. Although originating in organisational research (Edmondson 1999), the concept is increasingly relevant to qualitative youth research involving sensitive topics. In group interviews, levels of psychological safety shape both the content and form of responses, with participants potentially displaying hesitation, constrained responses, or alignment with peers as they assess the safety of the environment.

These dynamics are further shaped by peer interaction and adult presence, including teachers, which may reinforce hierarchies or introduce a heightened awareness of being observed. Research suggests that adult authority can encourage more socially desirable or performative responses, particularly in sensitive contexts such as SRE (Bragg 2007; Renold 2005; Holland et al. 2010). Peer dynamics may also enable or constrain participation, offering support for some while inhibiting others. Group discussions therefore involve ongoing negotiation of identity, belonging and risk (Kitzinger 1995; Gibbs 1997), meaning that group atmosphere must be understood as actively produced rather than neutral.

In this study, observations relating to group atmosphere, participation, and emotional tone are treated as analytically significant rather than descriptive. Indicators such as hesitation, silence, laughter, and shifts in participation are understood as interactional features through which participants negotiate involvement and assess psychological safety. Attending to these features aligns with qualitative approaches that treat interaction itself as data (Denscombe 2010; Silverman 2013). This enables a more rigorous analysis, moving beyond surface-level descriptions (e.g. sessions “running smoothly” or participants appearing “nervous”) to examine how power relations and varying levels of safety shape what is said, how it is expressed, and what remains unspoken.

3.5 Access, sampling and recruitment

3.5.1 Accessing local authority settings

NPT was selected as the research site due to its distinctive two-decade history of youth-informed SRE development. This includes the creation of the 2014 SRE Pack, long-established youth participation structures, and my own sustained professional involvement in these initiatives (1.2;1.3). Despite this extensive history, no empirical research had yet examined young people’s current experiences of SRE in NPT. This gap provided a timely and strategic opportunity to explore whether youth voice and agency, central to earlier SRE developments

in the area, had been sustained within contemporary school-based SRE provision.

Initial access negotiations began in May 2018 when I contacted key gatekeepers within the local authority, beginning with the Deputy Director of Education, to share information about the study, clarify permissions, and gauge interest. Had access been denied, I would have approached another authority; however, a tentative agreement was reached, enabling me to proceed with ethics approval and further planning meetings. These discussions clarified the rationale for site selection, established expectations around time and resources, highlighted possible disruptions, and outlined how findings would be shared with the authority (Bogdan and Biklen 1998).

A subsequent meeting on 25 June 2018 raised ethical questions around confidentiality and participant safety. Once reassured that appropriate safeguarding measures were in place, gatekeepers approved the study and viewed it as consistent with their commitment to promoting young people's voice and agency. They agreed to select three of the eight secondary schools within NPT local authority at the time of data collection (2018), during a period of ongoing school reorganisation, based on enrolment size, implementation of the full 2014 SRE resource pack (1.3;3.7.2.2), and the potential for demographic diversity across age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and geography. A Challenge Advisor was appointed to support logistics and liaise with both myself and the school-based contacts.

3.5.2 Accessing the youth advisory and pilot groups

Two local youth groups in NPT were recruited: 1) a youth advisory group (the Youth Council) to support the co-production and advice on the research design, methods, process and consent forms, and 2) an LGBTQ+ group to pilot the workshop activities and interview procedures. Access to both groups was granted by the Principal Youth Officer. Youth workers responsible for each group in NPT were appointed to support logistics and liaise with me and the young people involved throughout the study.

3.5.3 Accessing school settings and participants

Young people aged 14-16 (Years 10 and 11) were targeted because they had completed Key Stage 3 SRE and were therefore able to reflect on the provision they received. Diversity across gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion and social class was intentionally sought within each school to support variation in perspectives. The Youth Council advisory group and LGBTQ+ pilot group contributed to method development but were not included in the main dataset.

A purposeful, concept-driven sampling strategy (Patton 2002; Bowling 2006) was adopted to identify young people best positioned to provide rich and relevant insights into their experiences of SRE. Purposeful sampling aligned with the study's interpretivist, participatory approach, prioritising depth, contextual understanding and the inclusion of young people with direct, lived experience of SRE in school settings. The Challenge Advisor for the selected schools contacted the lead SRE teachers, who then identified young people meeting the sampling criteria and invited them to attend in-school consultation and information sessions (Table 1). This was followed by informed consent procedures for both participants and parents (3.10.1).

Initial expressions of interest were high: 21 pupils in School A, 24 in School B and 16 in School C. Where interest exceeded the target number, pupils not selected were offered the option of attending a follow-up group discussion. Ultimately, all young people who returned both participant and parental/guardian consent forms were able to participate. Across the three schools, 36 invitations were issued, and 27 young people completed the study, resulting in a diverse and ethically robust participant group. Participants' self-selected gender identities included Male (M), Female (F), Trans Male (TM), Trans Female (TF) and Non-Binary (NB), as summarised in Table 1. Data collection tools used in this study included semi-structured group interviews, participatory activity stations, visual artefacts, fieldnotes, photographs of workshop outputs, and participant-generated written materials (Sections 3.6.3.7).

3.6. Operationalisation of the research design

To implement the co-production research design, a structured four-phase process was developed that brought together young people from NPT local authority education services, including both schools and youth settings. The four-phase implementation of this design is summarised in Table 1. This outlines the settings involved, participant numbers, the research tasks undertaken, and the timescales for each phase. Additional contextual information about each school cannot be provided as this would risk identification; therefore, only non-identifiable summary details are included.

Table 1: Four-Phase Approach - Research tasks and data collection strategies

Setting	Number of participants and Gender	Task	Date
Phase 1	N=12	Meeting one Consultation research design, methods, process and consent forms	21/7/18 [2hrs]
Youth Council Advisory Group	M x 2 F x 10	Meeting two Presentation/consultation on revised consent forms for signing off	18/08/18 [2hrs]
Phase 4		Meeting three Study progress feedback	7/07/2019 [2hrs]
Phase 2	N=10	Meeting one Introducing the study and establishing pilot consent	30/10/2018 [2hrs]
LGBTQ+ Pilot Group	M x 2 F x 6	Meeting two Carry out the pilot for the workshops and interviews	06/11/18 [3hrs]
Phase 4	TF x 1 NB x 1	Meeting three Study progress feedback	01/7/19 [2hrs]
Phase 3	N=10	Meeting one Consultation/Information/Consent	15/11/18 [2hrs]
School A	M x 6 F x 3	Meeting two	20/11/18

Phase 4	TM x 1 TF x 1	Carry out the study [Group workshops and interviews] Meeting three Feedback to participants	[3hrs] 02/07/19 [2hrs]
Phase 3	N=14	Meeting one Consultation/Information/ Consent	19/11/18 [2hrs]
School B	M x 7	Meeting two Carry out the Study [Group workshops and interviews]	26/11/18 [3hrs]
	F x 6	Meeting Three Feedback to participants	03/07/19 [2hrs]
Phase 4	NB X1		
Phase 3	N=3	Meeting one Consultation/Information/ Consent	15/11/18 [2hrs]
School C	M x 1	Meeting two Carry out the Study [Group workshops and interviews]	20/11/18 [3hrs]
	F x 2	Meeting three Feedback to participants	04/07/19 [2hrs]
Phase 4			

3.7 Data collection phases and procedures

The four-phase structure was designed to generate data that directly address the research questions, particularly young people's views, experiences, and opportunities for influence within SRE. This section describes how the data collection methods outlined in Section 3.6 were implemented in practice through a phased and sequential process. The study was conducted across four interconnected phases, each with a distinct procedural purpose: consultation and co-production with a youth advisory group; piloting with an LGBTQ+ youth group; participatory workshops and interviews in school settings; and feedback sessions with participants. Presenting data collection in this way provides transparency around the timing, sequencing, and ethical delivery of the research and demonstrates how participatory principles were operationalised at each stage.

3.7.1 Phase one: Youth advisory group: co-producing the information and consent leaflet

The first phase (Meeting one) involved consulting with the local authority's Youth Council to: a) confirm their willingness to act as the youth advisory group, and b) provide them with all draft recruitment materials I had created. This included information sheets and consent forms for both participants (Appendix E) and parents/guardians (Appendix F) for their consideration, advice and to co-produce the final design and wording of these materials. The Youth Council responded enthusiastically and engaged deeply with the materials. Their manager initially divided the group into two for discussion, after which I facilitated the session and gathered their verbal feedback. Ethical and confidentiality issues were also discussed collaboratively prior to the session commencing.

This process enabled meaningful dialogue and led to several valuable suggestions. For example, the group proposed a single A4 leaflet format, with consent sections on either side, one for the participant to keep, and one for the researcher (Appendix G and H). They recommended adapting the leaflet for parents, with tailored wording (Appendix I), and requested final approval rights before use. Additionally, they suggested using a heart symbol on the leaflet's front to highlight key terms such as sex education, health, LGBTQ+, binary, and non-binary, with larger text and a foldable heart-shaped design (Appendix J). These requests were honoured, and the final leaflets were returned to the Youth Council (Meeting two) on 18/08/2018 for sign-off.

Finally, the group requested feedback regarding the study progress (Meeting three) and a summary and/or report upon completion of the study. They also expressed interest in co-producing a dissemination event. Suggested invitees included cabinet members, the Director of Education, Principal Youth Officer, education and health professionals, and their peers.

3.7.2 Phase two: LGBTQ+ pilot group: facilitation, changes, reflection and learning

Phase two involved consultation with young people from the LGBTQ+ group in NPT (Meeting one). I introduced the study, and their consent was sought for the

group to act as a pilot to test the proposed data collection methods, including the creative participatory activities and the semi-structured interview schedule.

3.7.2.1 Development and refinement of the semi-structured interview schedule

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore participants' experiences of SRE using open-ended questions that supported depth, flexibility, and co-constructed meaning (Mason 2002). The interview schedule was developed directly from the aims of the study and the content of the Key Stage 3 and 4 SRE Pack (2014), ensuring relevance to participants' lived experiences. I discussed the research questions (1.5) with the LGBTQ+ pilot group and provided examples of possible questions I was considering exploring with participants (e.g. "who, in your opinion, should provide SRE to young people?"). Their feedback played a central role in shaping the question set and the terminology used (for example, choosing familiar words such as "information" that their peers would understand). They also identified key areas that required further exploration, including:

- Whether all lessons were LGBTQ+ inclusive
- Topics covered (e.g. consent, LGBTQ+ content, safe relationships, domestic abuse)
- Key messages remembered
- Opportunities to influence SRE content
- Views on who should facilitate SRE
- Suggestions for improvement

To support consistency and comparability across schools, a pre-designed set of questions were used (Patton 1990). Although some of the initial questions appear closed, they were intentionally designed as low-threat opening prompts. Each was followed by open-ended probes (e.g. "Can you tell me more about that?", "What was that like?", "How did you feel about the way it was taught?") to support depth, elaboration and co-constructed meaning. These follow-ups ensured that the interviews generated rich, interpretive data while remaining sensitive to young people's comfort and preferences:

1. Do you remember having the lessons outlined in the Key Stage 3 Year 7, 8 and 9 Pack?
2. What do you remember about the lessons in the Pack?
3. Did you have information about consent?
4. Did you have LGBTQ+ information?
5. Have you received any lessons on Safe Relationships?
6. Have you had any lessons on Domestic Abuse?
7. Who, in your opinion, should provide SRE to young people?
8. How can SRE be improved?
9. What age do you think young people should start having SRE lessons?
10. What opportunity have you had in your school to exercise your 'voice' and influence SRE?

While these questions provided a framework, I also needed to manage group dynamics and make real-time decisions about which topics to explore further (Mason 2002). To support deeper discussion, I used visual aids such as the SRE lesson pack, which helped participants engage more meaningfully and contributed to richer data collection (Appendix B).

3.7.2.2 Pilot facilitation, testing and methodological adjustments

In the second session (Meeting Two), I implemented the pilot, which took the form of activity-based workshops and semi-structured interviews (some individual, others in small groups), using the question set outlined above (3.7.2.1). I used handouts, flipchart paper, pens and SRE lesson materials currently used in NPT secondary schools. Time was allocated to test the interview questions and room setup. This enabled assessment of the clarity, appropriateness and sequencing of questions; the feasibility of the activities; and the overall structure, timing and framing of the session. Given the sensitivity of the topic, this phase was essential for identifying necessary adjustments and ensuring that the methods were ethical, accessible, appropriate and supportive for young people. In the final session (Meeting Three), I provided an update on the progress of the study, as requested by the group during the pilot stage.

During the pilot, the group highlighted potential challenges around cognitive testing, participant perceptions, and the practical application of qualitative methods. Cognitive testing focused on whether young people could easily understand the wording, sequencing, and purpose of the interview questions and creative tasks. Participant perceptions related to their comfort, embarrassment, and emotional responses during the activities. Practical application referred to whether the methods, materials, and timings were workable in real settings. Ethical considerations, including consent, confidentiality, and privacy, were also explored collaboratively.

Following the pilot trial run, young people provided detailed feedback that informed several practical adjustments to improve engagement, reduce embarrassment, and enhance outcomes for the research participants. For example, the pilot group suggested that participants would be more engaged if they could move around the classroom. They recommended setting up six activity stations to encourage interaction and privacy. Stations One, Two and Three featured flipchart paper with the following questions:

- What is your understanding of the term SRE?
- Where do you get your information about SRE in your school?
- Where do you get your information about SRE outside your school?

Originally intended as an introductory icebreaker, the pilot group suggested these questions were repositioned at stations to allow participants to respond privately and at their own pace, reducing possible discomfort at such an early stage of the fieldwork.

For Station Four, the pilot group suggested using the SRE timeline I had initially created (on a roll of plain wallpaper) to help participants record what they remembered from the lessons they should have received in Years 7–11, but with some modifications. The SRE pack implemented in 2014 in all NPT secondary schools (Appendix B) includes five mandatory lessons, and the pilot group recommended giving participants the option either to write directly on the

wallpaper, as they had done themselves, or to place the lesson resources used by facilitators onto it (Appendix K, L and M).

They argued that this approach would reduce the likelihood of participants feeling embarrassed, particularly about their understanding of the topic or the language needed to express what they remembered about the lessons, resources, or themes (for example, terms such as penis, vagina, or different types of contraception). This change also allowed me to take photographs of the anonymised contributions at the end of each activity, with permission from all participants, as suggested by the pilot group.

For Station Five, the group suggested using the heart theme I co-produced with the advisory group (featured on the information and consent leaflets) to create cut-out hearts. One heart would have a red border to represent positive statements, and another would have a blue border to represent negative statements. Instead of using the plain paper plates I originally suggested to them. These resources would be used to generate data in response to the following questions:

- What do you consider to be a positive aspect of SRE in your school?
- What do you consider to be a negative aspect of SRE in your school?

These questions became part of the creative research methods, allowing participants to write their responses on paper hearts, cut them out, thread string through them, and display them as bunting to express their feelings about SRE in their schools (Appendix N and O).

Station Six focused on semi-structured interviews. A key concern raised by the pilot group was the number of participants interviewed at one time. They recommended that, before interviews begin, participants should be asked how they would prefer to take part, individually, in pairs, or in small groups (no more than six). Given the sensitive nature of the topic, the group felt this flexibility would support those less confident in speaking out. As one young person put it, “you know, like, safety in numbers.” This idea was explored further with the group, who

emphasised the importance of peer support during interviews. They noted that discussing sex education one-on-one with an adult could be embarrassing for some and raised concerns about audio recording. The group suggested that participants should be informed in advance about the use of audio recordings, so they could make an informed decision about their involvement.

Some felt audio recording might be intrusive and asked why typed notes could not be used instead, as I had done during the pilot. In response, I agreed to offer participants a choice between audio recording and typed field notes. However, all participants ultimately chose typed notes, and no audio recordings were used during the study. In the research findings, all responses are therefore coded by data source using notes typed verbatim (TV), participants' written text (PWT), and field notes (FN), used when I was unable to identify individual participant's. Several members of the pilot group also recommended introducing a co-created agreement with participants, similar to their own, to help establish an emotionally safe and inclusive research environment.

3.7.2.3 Researcher reflection and methodological reasoning

Reflecting on the pilot, the originally planned two-hour workshop would not be sufficient. A considerable amount of time was spent discussing the recommended changes, and the depth of engagement required more flexibility. As a result, the workshop duration was extended to three hours in school settings, with agreement from gatekeepers.

Feedback from the pilot group prompted me to reconsider the balance between individual and group-based methods. I had originally planned to use individual semi-structured interviews to enable privacy and depth. However, the group expressed concerns that one-to-one interviews might heighten embarrassment, feel overly formal, and limit their confidence when discussing sensitive SRE topics. They described a strong preference for "safety in numbers," emphasising that small-group settings offered peer support, reduced discomfort, and created a more relaxed environment.

Reflecting on this, I weighed the strengths and limitations of both approaches. While individual interviews offer privacy and potentially richer personal narratives, they can increase vulnerability and discomfort when discussing sensitive subjects. In contrast, group-based methods may reduce depth but support confidence, comfort, and participatory dialogue. This flexible approach aligns with guidance on youth-centred research, which emphasises the importance of choice, agency and reducing power imbalances (Punch 2002; Alderson and Morrow 2020). Although young people were offered the option of individual interviews, none chose to take this up. This may reflect the established peer relationships within the groups and the supportive nature of the school and youth-work contexts, where collective participation can feel more comfortable and less exposing than one-to-one discussions of sensitive topics (Punch 2002). Existing research also notes that young people often prefer the familiarity and reassurance of peers when discussing potentially sensitive issues, particularly when power dynamics or emotional discomfort may be heightened in individual interviews (Alderson and Morrow 2020).

Equally valuable was the creative co-production process with the pilot group. It helped me explore diverse ways to collect rich data using multiple methods. Conducting interviews during the pilot also enhanced my ability to observe participants' body language, reactions, and comprehension, skills that proved useful during data analysis (Denscombe 2010; Silverman 2013) and are reflected throughout the findings chapters. Whilst the pilot generated additional questions and examined the group's views, experiences, and ideas for improving SRE, none of this material was analysed or included in the findings. Their input instead developed the methodology and supported its clarity and suitability for wider dissemination (Bryman 2016).

Adopting an approach shaped by young people's suggestions brought clear benefits, particularly in ensuring that the methods felt accessible, comfortable, and developmentally appropriate (Alderson and Morrow 2020). Their insights strengthened the participatory ethos of the study and improved the practical feasibility of the data-collection process. However, there were also limitations. Relying solely on young people's perspectives risked narrowing the

methodological lens, potentially overlooking tensions between participant preference and methodological rigour, including issues of depth, individual disclosure, and researcher control over the balance between comfort and challenge (Holland et al. 2010). It also meant that the methods evolved in response to a specific group whose experiences may not reflect the broader youth population. This approach therefore privileged authenticity and participant ownership (Kellett 2011) but required careful consideration to ensure that inclusivity and ethical responsiveness did not compromise the richness or comparability of the data generated. Methods such as classroom observation or follow-up interviews were explored but set aside, as they did not align with the co-produced focus on young people's perspectives on the SRE Pack or with ethical considerations in live SRE lessons (e.g. participants' privacy, consent, emotional safety and the potential disruption of sensitive classroom dynamics).

3.7.3 Phase three (meeting one): Pre-study participant consultation and recruitment in school settings

Before conducting the workshops and interviews, I consulted with all young people interested (Meeting one) at each school. These classroom-based consultations introduced the study, explained how participants could take part, and covered key topics, such as research methods, timescales, confidentiality, the right to withdraw, and the consent process. Questions were encouraged, and interest was gauged. It was agreed by gatekeepers and the Youth Advisory Group that parental consent would not be required prior to this stage, as young people needed time to discuss the study with their parents/guardians. Each school allocated two hours for the session. Co-produced leaflets and consent forms, developed with the Youth Advisory Group, were used to support understanding and informed decision-making (Appendix G and H).

Most participants wanted to give consent on the day (8 in School A, 9 in School B, and 2 in School C), while 8 others chose to take the forms home for consideration. All were asked to return signed participant and parent/guardian consent forms on the scheduled workshop date, approximately one week later. They were informed that participation would not be possible without both forms.

Reflecting on these consultations, I found the sessions ran smoothly, supported by my experience working with young people, and insights from the pilot phase. Despite this, I felt some anxiety before each session, mainly around whether there would be sufficient interest. Thankfully, this concern proved unfounded, but it highlighted the importance of preparation and adaptability in school settings.

School A's group was welcoming and inquisitive, asking about the study and its potential impact. School B's group was initially quiet but became more engaged after asking questions. School C's group was more challenging, remaining disengaged throughout, except for one young person who asked, "If I want to take part but my parents don't want me to, can I still take part?" (FN). I explained that parental consent was required and offered to meet with parents/guardians if needed. After sharing my concerns with a teacher at School C, we agreed that some students did not yet know each other well due to the recent merger of two local schools, which may have affected their confidence. This awareness prompted me to reflect on how to better support quieter participants during both the consultation and forthcoming workshops and interviews.

3.7.4 Phase three (meeting two): Participatory workshops and interviews in school settings

Before beginning the workshops and interviews (Meeting two), participants from all three schools were re-approached to confirm their continued willingness to take part. Once reaffirmed (all consented) both participant and parent/guardian consent forms were collected to ensure all ethical requirements were met. Participants were informed about the session structure, including the schedule, planned breaks, workshop components, and data collection methods (e.g. activities, stations, and interviews) (Table 2). In line with feedback from the pilot group, particularly regarding preferences for interview formats, participants were given the option to choose how they wished to be interviewed: individually, pairs, or small groups. The choices made in each school are discussed later in the chapter.

To support participants' understanding of the workshop process, I introduced each activity and station using clear, accessible language. I emphasised that the stations were not tests but participatory spaces where they could express their views in ways that felt comfortable, including writing, drawing, discussion, or working individually or in groups. I explained how each station related to the broader aims of the study, highlighting how their contributions might help address the research questions, so participants understood the value of their input. This helped reduce any pressure, increased transparency, and supported meaningful engagement with the activities.

Before beginning the research activities, to support gender-diverse young people, I asked all participants for their preferred names and pronouns. I explained the rationale behind this approach, emphasising respect, inclusion, and the importance of creating a safe space where participants felt seen and valued. I also offered to help share this information with others, such as teachers, school staff, or peers, if participants felt uncomfortable doing so themselves. Several participants were open about their preferences, indicating a level of trust and comfort within the research environment. Some noticed the pronoun badge I was wearing and asked if they could have one too, which I was happy to provide. This early step contributed to setting a collaborative and affirming tone for the workshops.

Table 2: Framework and data collection strategies for participatory workshops and interviews

Activity/ Stations 1-6	Explore	Aim of Workshop	Data Collected
Activity/Station 1	Participation methods Language and meaning	Building and understanding of participants' interpretation of the term SRE Establish participant self-	Photographs of visual data from participatory methods (e.g. written text) on flipchart paper (Figure 2) Typed field notes from participants'

		selected and led groups	discussions
Activity/Station 2	Participation methods Language and meaning	Building and understanding of participant's knowledge and access to SRE messages in their school setting	Photography's of visual data from participatory methods (e.g. written text) on flipchart paper (Figure 2) Typed field notes from participants' discussions
Activity/Station 3	Participation methods. Language and meaning	Building and understanding of participant's knowledge and access to SRE messages outside school settings	Photography's of visual data from participatory methods (e.g. written text) on flipchart paper. (Figure 2) Typed field notes from participants' discussions
Activity/Station 4	Participation methods Language and meaning	Participants in self-selected groups Exploring and reflecting on their current SRE resources	Photographs of visual data from participatory methods (e.g. written text) on a wallpaper timeline Participant observations (Figure 4). Typed field notes from participants' discussions
Activity/Station 5	Participatory methods Language and meaning	Reflection activity using anonymous questions box in relation to their experiences of SRE (e.g. positive or negative)	Photographs of visual data (e.g. written text) on individual cut-out hearts collected anonymously (Figure 3,7,8)

Activity/Station 6	Participation and decision making developing future SRE lessons. Language and meaning	Participants in self-selected groups for semi-structure interview Exploring their current SRE resources and ideas for change.	Semi-structured interviews/small groups/guided conversations/visual data (e.g. schools SRE packs) Participant lead/participant observations/ fieldnotes/typed/audio recordings/ (interview/group discussions) Research findings Chapter 4,5,6
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3.7.4.1 Participants in School A

Participants in School A (6 male, 4 female) moved around the classroom with ease. Activities were clearly numbered, and stations were arranged to allow free movement and collaboration. In line with the participatory approach used throughout the study, participants were given full choice over how they wished to work and therefore self-selected their groups at the start of the workshop. These self-selected groups remained the same across all six stations and were also carried forward into the interview stage, allowing participants to engage in their preferred social configuration. As a result, two mixed-gender groups were formed: Group One included 3 male, 1 female, and 1 trans male participant; Group Two included 2 male, 2 female, and 1 trans female participant. After completing all activities, participants gave permission for photographs to be taken of their contributions. No individuals were included in the images (Appendix K).

In School A, participants chose to be interviewed within their pre-established groups. Both groups opted not to be audio recorded. During the session, Group One took a comfort break, during which the school provided refreshments. A teacher supervised the break, allowing me to interview Group Two. Later, when Group Two took their comfort break and received refreshments, I interviewed Group One. This approach ensured that the session progressed smoothly.

Participants were enthusiastic and gave detailed responses, which are explored further in the findings.

3.7.4.2 Participants in school B

Participants in school B (7 male, 6 females, 1 non-binary) also chose to carry out the workshops and have the interviews conducted in two groups (group three: 4 males, 3 females; group four: 2 males, 4 females and 1 non-binary). As in School A, participants self-selected their groups and chose not to be audio recorded. Having already completed this process in School A, I felt more confident and relaxed managing two groups throughout the session. Prior to the study, I arranged with the teacher to plan for comfort breaks and refreshments, should participants choose to take them during interviews. Although the activity stations were clearly numbered, a few participants were initially unsure where to begin. To address this, I walked both groups around the room to explain the structure and expectations.

Once everyone felt clear and comfortable, the session began. Unlike School A, the atmosphere in School B was noticeably more light-hearted, with laughter and visible enjoyment. This contributed to a more engaging experience for both the participants and myself. The interviews were productive, with participants expressing their views confidently and appearing well-informed about the subject matter. Several even volunteered to pilot any new SRE lessons developed through co-production in their school. After completing all activities, participants gave permission for photographs to be taken of their contributions. No individuals were included in the images (Appendix L).

3.7.4.3 Participants in school C

Only three participants took part in the study at School C, forming one group (Group Five: 1 male, 2 females). As in School A, and B participants chose not to be audio recorded. The group agreed that I could walk them through the room and explain each activity as we progressed. They appeared nervous at first, possibly because the teacher remained in the room for most of the session. This

had not happened in the other schools, so I asked the teacher why they felt the need to stay. The teacher explained that they wanted to support participants who, in their opinion, were feeling anxious. I then discreetly checked with the group to make sure they were comfortable with this arrangement, and they all responded positively.

Although it took some time for them to engage, their confidence grew steadily. Due to the small group size, activities progressed quickly. By the time we reached the interview stage, they chose to remain together and responded confidently and equally to all questions. The teacher had left the room by this point, and I reflected on whether this contributed to their increased confidence. As in Schools A and B, participants gave permission for photographs to be taken of their completed activities, with no individuals included in the images (Appendix M).

3.7.5 Reflections on the data collection process

Across all three school settings, participants consistently chose to work in self-selected groups and maintained these groups throughout all workshop stations and interviews. This continuity supported the participatory ethos of the study by enabling young people to work alongside peers with whom they felt comfortable and confident. In each school, groups interacted confidently with the materials, and conversations flowed naturally within their chosen peer configurations. This stability enhanced engagement and encouraged participants to express their views more openly, contributing to the depth and quality of the data generated.

After the fieldwork in all three schools, I reflected on the workshops and interviews and was pleasantly surprised by how well the process went overall, particularly the interviews in Schools A and B. Although I had originally planned for smaller groups or pairs, participants chose to form two relatively large groups in each school. Managing these larger groups during interviews was challenging and required close observation and sustained concentration to ensure all contributions were captured.

The pilot phase proved invaluable in preparing for interviews. I was also surprised by how effectively I managed the fieldwork notes, especially as all groups opted

out of audio recording and asked for their responses to be typed verbatim. As a result, typed observational notes became a key source of rich qualitative data throughout the research. This approach was informed by feedback from the LGBTQ+ pilot group (3.7.2), who emphasised the importance of offering participants the option to decline audio recording. Their advice shaped my expectations going into the school-based fieldwork and helped me anticipate the possibility that young people might prefer typed responses over being recorded.

Although audio recording is frequently used in qualitative research, particularly in interview-based studies, I found that young people in this study were noticeably less comfortable when recording equipment was proposed. This initially surprised me, given its prevalence in the methodological literature; however, on reflection, the reluctance shown by participants aligns with research involving young people discussing sensitive topics such as sexuality, relationships, and identity. Young people may experience heightened embarrassment, fear of judgement, or concern about how their words might be stored, replayed, or interpreted by adults when discussing such issues (Mannay 2013; Holland et al. 2010). These anxieties can be amplified in school settings, where power dynamics and concerns about confidentiality are particularly salient (Renold 2005; Renold 2013; Gallagher 2008). In group interviews, recording devices can further inhibit participation, especially among quieter or marginalised young people, who may worry about peer reactions or being identified by their voice (Gibbs 1997; Sim and Sharp 1998).

Recognising these dynamics and informed by pilot-group feedback as well as my developing ethical stance, I prioritised participants' comfort and agency over methodological convention. As a result, I offered groups the option to decline audio recording, and all groups chose to proceed with verbatim typed notes instead. This decision reflects my commitment to a participatory, youth-centred approach, even though it meant relinquishing some of the analytical affordances that audio data provides. While this approach supported openness, it also introduced methodological compromises. Real-time typing inevitably required moments of pausing, checking wording, and restarting, which may have disrupted conversational flow or produced more linear, coherent talk than might naturally

occur. Had audio recording been possible, it would have enabled attention to hesitations, overlaps, interruptions and vocal nuance, enriching possibilities for forms of analysis such as discourse or conversation analysis. By contrast, typed data risks smoothing out such features, potentially shaping the type of knowledge produced.

However, in practice, the absence of recording equipment appeared to facilitate richer and more candid dialogue, particularly around sensitive topics. Typing responses verbatim in real time allowed me to maintain eye contact, respond affectively, and remain attuned to non-verbal cues and group dynamics. I supplemented typed notes with detailed fieldnotes capturing gestures, pauses, affective atmospheres, and contextual details that would not necessarily have been evident through audio recording alone. These notes were later triangulated with workshop artefacts and participants' written material, enhancing the credibility and depth of the data. Ultimately, the choice to forego audio recording represents a deliberate ethical trade-off: sacrificing certain analytical possibilities to create conditions in which young people felt safe, respected, and able to speak openly about intimate and sensitive aspects of their lives

3.7.6 Phase four (meeting three): Feedback to participants and reflection on emerging themes for data clarity

Participants across all schools requested feedback on the outcomes of the research once data collection had been completed. This phase took place a few months after the final workshop and allowed me to share preliminary findings with the young people. During these sessions, I revisited and discussed the themes generated through the workshops and interviews, recording their reflections through fieldnotes. This supported data clarity and helped me check the resonance of my interpretations with participants' experiences. While not used to validate the themes, this step aligned with good practice in qualitative research and participant involvement (Birt et al. 2016).

3.8. Data analysis and transcription protocol

Data management was central to the study. All identifiable data were anonymised through pseudonyms and the removal or alteration of identifying details; schools are referred to as School A, B, and C, and participants by pseudonyms. Bracketed identifiers (e.g. School A-G2, FN) indicate the anonymised school and group number (Appendix P), followed by the source of the data, e.g. FN = fieldnotes (3.7.2.2). Data collection included handwritten and typed fieldnotes from workshops and interviews to record responses accurately, along with visual documentation (e.g. photographs of materials and participants' written work) to capture their views and experiences of SRE. In analysing these materials, I included content directly related to the research questions and omitted peripheral dialogue or actions. In transcripts and fieldnotes, the symbol '[...]' indicates non-relevant omitted dialogue. Table 3 provides an overview of all data sources and recording time across the research settings.

Table 3: Overview of research data sources and recording time

Data Type	Research setting and session	Session/ meeting	Hours
Fieldnotes/participants observation and written text (e.g. hand-outs leaflets/consent forms) given to the group for discussion and advice.	Youth Council/Advisory Group. Consultation (co-production of leaflets/consent forms)	One	1.5
	Revised leaflets/consent forms sign off	Two	3.5
	Feedback (about the study/planning for co-producing and piloting the new SRE Lessons in school settings 2020)	Three	2.0
Fieldnotes/participants observation and written text (e.g. hand-outs/flipchart paper/wallpaper timeline) after undertaking the pilot	LGBTQ Group. Initial meeting	One	1.5
	Pilot (deliver the intended workshop/ activities)	Two	3.0
	Feedback (about the study/planning for co-producing and piloting the	Three	2.0

	new SRE Lessons in school settings 2020)		
Fieldnotes/participant observation/ photographs of objects and written text (e.g. hand-outs/flipchart paper/wallpaper timeline) and typed recordings (e.g. interviews/group discussions).	Secondary School A Consultation (information sharing about the study/Q&A session and consent)	One	1.5
	Delivery (carry out the study/workshop and semi-structured interviews)	Two	4.5
	Feedback (about the study/planning for co-producing and piloting the new SRE Lessons in school settings 2020)	Three	2.0
Fieldnotes/participant observation/ photographs of objects and written text (e.g. hand-outs/flipchart paper/wallpaper timeline) and typed recordings (e.g. interviews/group discussions).	Secondary School B Consultation (information sharing about the study/Q&A session and consent)	One	1:0
	Delivery (carry out the study/workshop and semi-structured interviews)	Two	6.5
	Feedback (about the study/planning for co-producing and piloting the new SRE Lessons in school settings 2020)	Three	1.5
Fieldnotes/participant observation/ photographs of objects and written text (e.g. hand-outs/flipchart paper/wallpaper timeline) and typed recordings (e.g. interviews/group discussions).	Secondary School C Consultation (information sharing about the study/Q&A session and consent)	One	1.5
	Delivery (carry out the study/workshop and semi-structured interviews)	Two	3.5
	Feedback (about the study/planning for co-producing and piloting the new SRE Lessons in school settings 2020)	Three	1.0

3.8.1 Reflexive thematic analysis and analytic process

Analysis began with deep immersion in the data through repeated reading of participants' workshop materials, typed fieldnotes, and typed interview notes. Because no audio recordings were used, familiarisation involved systematically expanding and refining my fieldnotes and written accounts rather than transcription. This process enabled close engagement with the data and early noticing of patterns, contextual detail, and nuance, in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) emphasis on the importance of sustained interaction with the dataset. Coding was undertaken inductively and at the semantic level. Codes were generated to capture meaningful features of participants' accounts without imposing a pre-existing analytic framework. For example, early codes relating to "outside agencies" (OA) captured participants' references to trusted and preferred SRE educators, which included school nurses, youth workers, and specialist organisations. Coding was treated as an interpretive and reflexive process rather than a mechanical exercise, consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2019) positioning of researcher subjectivity as an analytic resource. These inductively generated codes formed the basis for constructing broader patterns of meaning.

This interpretivist lens also shaped how the data were interpreted, informing a participatory and dialogue-based approach that prioritised young people's voices and supported the co-construction of meaning through interaction. This was reflected in the flexible design of workshops and semi-structured group interviews, where participants were able to express their perspectives using their own language and drawing on their lived experiences. The interpretivist position also informed the analytical approach, with reflexive thematic analysis used to interpret how meanings were constructed within specific social and relational contexts, rather than seeking objective or generalisable truths.

In practice, this meant that data were analysed as socially constructed meanings rather than treated as objective accounts. This involved moving beyond surface-level description to interpret how participants made sense of their experiences within specific social and relational contexts. For example, participants' descriptions of teachers as 'awkward' or 'judgy' were not treated simply as

evaluations, but were interpreted in relation to power dynamics, classroom relationships, and the sensitive nature of SRE. This interpretive process enabled a deeper understanding of how these perceptions influenced participants' preferences for alternative SRE providers. As such, reflexive thematic analysis was used not only to identify patterns across the dataset but to explore how meaning was produced through interaction, context, and the researcher's interpretive lens. This aligns with Braun and Clarke's (2019) position that themes are actively constructed through the researcher's engagement with the data, rather than passively emerging from it. Throughout the study, knowledge was understood as co-constructed, shaped through the interaction between participants' accounts and my interpretive role as a practitioner-researcher. Theme development was an iterative process involving close examination of how different codes related to one another and what broader narratives they suggested. For example, although "outside agencies" initially appeared as a straightforward category in the data, deeper engagement revealed that participants' preferences were not general but highly specific, reflecting nuanced judgements about expertise, trust, and comfort. This insight informed the construction of a more refined sub-thematic structure rather than treating OA as a single theme. In accordance with Braun and Clarke (2006), themes were understood as interpretive outputs that tell meaningful stories about the data rather than summaries of code frequency.

Participants' themes were reviewed against the coded extracts and the full dataset to ensure coherence, distinctiveness, and analytical value. During this recursive process, some early clusters were refined, collapsed, or reorganised. For example, initial references to "other people delivering SRE" required reconceptualisation because they lacked clarity until distinctions between different professionals were unpacked. This refinement process ensured that the thematic structure captured meaningful and well-defined patterns of shared experience. Each theme was then defined and named to capture its central organising concept. Theme names and definitions were developed through analytic memo writing and iterative drafting to clarify thematic boundaries and ensure conceptual precision. Where possible, themes drew on participants' own language to maintain authenticity and enhance resonance with their accounts.

Although reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) formed the core analytic approach (Braun and Clarke 2006; 2019), my interpretation was informed by sensitivity to language, positioning, and meaning-making, particularly when engaging with participants' visual and written artefacts. These interpretive practices were used to deepen understanding within the RTA framework rather than constituting separate discourse, or semiotic-analytic methods.

This layered approach is illustrated through the analysis of participants' discussions about who should deliver SRE. Many described teachers as "awkward," "judgy," or "not the right people." Within the reflexive thematic analysis, these comments were coded semantically as concerns about teacher-led delivery. Drawing on my social constructionist stance and elements of discourse analysis, I then explored how this language reflected wider cultural repertoires that position teachers as authority figures whose presence may inhibit open conversation. This helped explain why participants constructed external professionals, such as school nurses, youth workers, and specialist organisations, as more trustworthy.

Reflexivity remained central throughout the analysis. I used a research diary to document analytic decisions, interpretive dilemmas, and reflections on my insider role, supporting transparency and credibility in line with Braun and Clarke's (2019) guidance. Credibility was further strengthened by discussing emerging themes with participants during phase-four feedback sessions. These clarified early interpretations and ensured the analysis remained grounded in their perspectives (Birt et al. 2016). Through this process, patterns of meaning clustered into three distinctive conceptual areas that consistently re-emerged across workshop data, interviews, and visual materials, forming the basis of the three overarching themes.

Although issues such as image-sharing, grooming, online coercion and experiences of sexual harassment or gender-based violence commonly appear in wider SRE research, they did not emerge as strong or recurring patterns in this dataset. Where mentioned, they appeared only in isolated or under-developed

ways that lacked the coherence needed for theme development. In line with reflexive thematic analysis principles, and mindful of maintaining analytic richness within thesis word count constraints, these topics were not explored further in the findings. The focus instead remained on the most robust and patterned areas of meaning across the dataset.

In organising the findings chapters, I adopted a thematic structure. This reflects the principles of reflexive thematic analysis, where themes are the central analytic outcomes capturing patterned meaning across the dataset. A thematic structure foregrounded participants' lived experiences and allowed each theme to be presented as analytically rich and nuanced, rather than fragmented across multiple chapters.

The analytic process resulted in three overarching themes, Rights-based SRE, Risk-focused SRE and LGBTQ+ Inclusive SRE. These were not predetermined but developed through iterative engagement with the data, involving cycles of coding, theme generation, refinement, and interpretive review in line with Braun and Clarke's (2019) principles. Subthemes within each theme capture important nuances and variations, ensuring that the depth and richness of participants' accounts were retained.

3.9 Reflexive practice throughout the research process

Reflexivity was embedded throughout this study as a core component of qualitative inquiry. Originating in anthropology, reflexivity requires researchers to critically examine how their assumptions, positionality, and actions shape the production and interpretation of data (Willig 2001). It acknowledges that researchers cannot remain detached observers, but instead co-construct meaning with participants through interaction, interpretation, and decision-making (Ely et al. 1991).

My reflexive practice involved continuous self-examination across the research process. I maintained a research diary that incorporated personal and epistemological reflexivity, enabling me to identify and critically engage with

moments where assumptions, emotional responses or insider knowledge shaped my interpretations. Rather than seeking to minimise this influence, the diary supported a transparent and analytically productive engagement with how my positioning informed meaning-making. The diary was structured around four key elements (Nadin and Cassell 2006):

- Observational: notes from interviews and observations.
- Methodological: reflections on my actions during data generation.
- Theoretical: early interpretations of the data.
- Analyticals: recurring themes and early inferences drawn from the data (Brewer 2000).

Reflexivity was also important during interviews. Researchers inevitably bring assumptions and experiences to qualitative work (Nadin and Cassell 2006), and interviewer presence shapes how participants respond. Rather than seeking to minimise this, I remained critically aware of how my positioning informed the interaction. I used open questions, encouraged participants to speak freely, and checked typed responses for accuracy, supporting data authenticity and a transparent, co-constructed account of participants' views.

Overall, reflexive practice strengthened both the ethical and analytical rigor of the study. It enabled ongoing attention to the power dynamics, assumptions, and interpretive decisions shaping theme development and the wider analytic narrative. Reflexive insights were recorded within my fieldnotes, including verbatim written observations, and are drawn upon throughout the thesis to illustrate this process. Reflexive engagement remained central during analysis, supporting navigation between participants' narratives and my interpretive responses (Shaw 2010). Reflexivity enhances the credibility and transparency of qualitative research by making visible the researcher's role in meaning-making and reducing the influence of implicit bias (Finlay and Gough 2003). Drawing on youth research literature, I also remained attentive to the micro-ethical dynamics of working with young people, including shifting power relations and responsibilities in participatory research (Holland et al. 2010). This reflexive approach informed the analytic process (3.9). Reflexivity extended beyond

personal reflection to an awareness of how my dual role as practitioner and researcher shaped the production of knowledge, including how meanings were interpreted and represented within the analysis.

3.10 Ethical approval and governance

Details of the study were submitted to Cardiff University's School of Social Sciences, Research Ethics Committee for consideration. A favorable outcome was received on August 2018 (Appendix Q). Key ethical considerations included informed consent from organisations, participants, and parents; confidentiality and privacy; potential harm and deception; and data collection and governance (British Psychological Society 2018; Punch 2013).

3.10.1 Participant and parents' informed consent

In line with Cardiff University's ethical guidelines and the principles of informed consent (British Psychological Society 2018), two tailored information and consent forms were developed: one for young people (Appendix G) and one for parents/guardians (Appendix I). These were reviewed by the youth council advisory group (Phase 1), who suggested layout and design changes to improve clarity and accessibility, while the essential ethical content remained unchanged.

Informed consent requires respect for participants' rights, dignity and autonomy while minimising harm (Bulmer 2008). The forms provided clear, age-appropriate information about the study's purpose, participation requirements and data storage. Both young people and their parents/guardians were required to sign before the study began, with young people hand-delivering the materials home to support discussion and informed decision-making. Parents were invited to contact me with any questions. Consent was treated as an ongoing process and revisited at several points, with pre-study consultation sessions offering opportunities for both young people and parents/guardians to ask questions and seek clarification.

3.10.2 Voluntary participation and withdrawal

Participants were clearly informed, both verbally and in writing, that participation was entirely voluntary and that they could decline or withdraw from the study at any point (Appendix G and H). These rights were reiterated at the start of each workshop or interview and throughout the study. Parents/guardians received the same information in their consent materials.

3.10.3 Minimising harm and safeguarding

The researcher has a responsibility to anticipate and minimise potential harm. Given the study's sensitive focus, particular attention was paid to reducing risks such as emotional distress, embarrassment, regret, or unintended disclosure. These issues were explored in pre-study discussions with stakeholders, including gatekeepers, teachers, and young people from the youth council, advisory group, and LGBTQ+ pilot group, to agree on appropriate materials, methods, and techniques.

Support from on-site professionals (e.g. teachers and safeguarding leads) was arranged in advance to ensure clear procedures were in place should a participant become distressed or make a disclosure requiring action. A safeguarding protocol was developed collaboratively and agreed by all parties. Participants were informed, before giving consent and again prior to data collection, that any disclosure indicating significant risk, or harm to themselves or others, would require adherence to local authority and school safeguarding procedures. An example scenario was provided to aid understanding, and participants were given opportunities to ask questions. No safeguarding concerns arose during the study.

3.10.4 Confidentiality, anonymity and data security

Confidentiality and anonymity were discussed with all stakeholders before the study began. Confidentiality is essential in research involving people, Denzin and

Lincoln (2011) emphasise that researchers carry a responsibility to protect participants from harm and uphold ethical integrity throughout the research process. Careful consideration was given to protecting the identities of participants, schools, and the local authority, recognising that disclosure of private information can be a significant source of harm in social research. Pseudonyms were used for both schools and participants, and all transcripts and reports were anonymised so that no one could be identified.

If participants wrote their names or included identifying details on workshop materials such as drawings, timelines, flipchart sheets or cut out hearts, or if any images captured such information, these were anonymised immediately. This involved removing the identifying detail or securely destroying the original item and recording the content in anonymised written form. Where needed, participants were asked to recreate their contribution without identifiable information. Photographs taken during data collection were checked at the point of capture to ensure that no faces, names or personal identifiers were visible. Field notes were stored in a locked cabinet that only I could access, and all digital data, including audio recordings, were password protected and stored in line with data protection regulations. These procedures ensured full adherence to confidentiality and anonymity requirements throughout the study.

3.11 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the interpretivist, participatory paradigm underpinning the study and justified the qualitative, multi-method design adopted to address the research questions. It described the co-produced four-phase structure, including the youth advisory and pilot stages, and the facilitation of participatory workshops, semi-structured group interviews and fieldnotes across three secondary schools. Together, these phases demonstrate the need for developmentally appropriate, ethically sensitive and emotionally attuned methods when researching young people's experiences of SRE.

The chapter also examined my positionality as an insider researcher and showed how reflexivity informed each stage of the process, from design and access

negotiations to data generation and analysis. Access, sampling and recruitment strategies were discussed alongside the practical, relational and ethical complexities of working in school settings. Key ethical considerations, including consent, voluntary participation, safeguarding, confidentiality and anonymity, were addressed to ensure the protection of participants, staff and the local authority. The integration of youth-informed and co-produced approaches reflects a sustained commitment to center young people's voices and supporting their agency. Finally, the chapter outlined the use of reflexive thematic analysis as the analytic framework guiding interpretation, establishing a clear methodological foundation for the findings chapters, which present three analytically derived themes capturing patterned meanings in young people's accounts of SRE.

Chapter Four

“What’s it got to do with us?”: Rights-based SRE

4.1 Introduction

Lilly: What you mean like ask us what information we want in our SRE lessons?
(School A-G1.TV)

Rhodri: I know we have rights but what has our rights got to do with SRE?
(School A-G2.TV)

These opening comments raise the central question explored in this chapter: to what extent do young people understand, experience, or participate in a rights-based approach to SRE in their schools? Although Welsh policy at the time emphasised pupil participation, the data indicate that many participants were unsure how their rights related to SRE or whether they were expected to influence what was taught. This chapter examines these issues through three interconnected themes: participants’ perceptions of rights-based SRE and how they understood their rights; the absence of voice and agency, reflected in limited opportunities to shape SRE; and reimagining rights-based SRE, through young people’s suggestions for improving participation. Together, these themes explore how rights-based policy rhetoric aligns with, or departs from, young people’s lived experiences of SRE.

4.2 “What’s it got to do with us?”: Participants’ perceptions of rights-based SRE

During the interviews participants began to show genuine interest in the concept of pupil voice within SRE and how they might influence the curriculum. They asked questions and started to explore what having a say in SRE could look like in their schools. This curiosity sparked lively debates across the different schools and groups during interviews, evidenced through overlapping talk, raised voices, and collective questioning as participants responded to one another. This interactional dynamic suggests a shift in psychological safety, where participants moved from initial uncertainty towards more confident, peer-supported engagement within the group. This curiosity sparked lively debates across the different schools and groups during interviews, evidenced through participants speaking over each other, raised voices, and collective questioning as they responded to one another. This interactional dynamic suggests a shift in psychological safety, where participants moved from initial uncertainty towards more confident, peer-supported engagement within the group. This is illustrated in the following exchange, where Lilly (School A-G1.TV) was waving her hands in the air and shouting, “miss, miss, what do you mean like ask us what information we want in our SRE lessons?”, with other participants in the same group calling out:

Rhys: Like what subjects we want to talk about [...] what like porn? (Some participants laugh). (School A-G1.TV)

Facilitator: Yes, including why and what you want to discuss about porn [...] it has to be relevant [...] for example any concerns you may have about accessing porn and the impact it can have on young people.

Rhys: like that’s gonna happen [...] why would they do that? (Rhys: School A-G1.TV)

This discussion shows participants’ initial surprise at the idea that they could influence SRE content and how unfamiliar participatory rights in SRE were to many of them. Importantly, this moment marked the start of a collective sense-making process rather than a fixed opinion. As participants explored what having a “say” might involve, the discussion shifted from disbelief to active questioning. Their understandings of participation were co-constructed through dialogue, with meaning developing as they responded to one another’s reactions and examples.

References to children's rights and the UNCRC were not widespread across the group interviews and emerged primarily within School A, where rights-based work had previously taken place. In this setting, some participants demonstrated an emerging awareness of their rights and how these were articulated through the UNCRC. Participants in one group interview reflected on what they understood their rights to be, offering examples such as: "we have human rights to keep us safe; to stop us being bullied, to have a good education," and "in Wales we have a Children's Commissioner [...] who is supposed to make sure adults protect us" (School A-G2.TV). This awareness was partly attributed to prior involvement in rights-based initiatives within the school, including one participant's involvement in the NPT Youth Council, where explicit rights education had been promoted within School A. In contrast, participants from other schools did not draw on UNCRC language or explicitly link their experiences of SRE to children's rights, suggesting that this level of awareness was shaped by localised practice rather than a shared or systemic understanding.

Despite this developing awareness of rights, participants were not consistently able to connect these rights to SRE. While young people could articulate rights relating to safety, protection and education in general terms, these discussions did not extend to rights within SRE, such as participation in decision-making, access to information, or influence over curriculum content. This reveals a gap between rights awareness and the practical application of rights-based principles within SRE provision, particularly in how participants understood the relevance of rights-based frameworks to their own experiences of SRE. One participant captured this uncertainty succinctly when asking:

Rhodri: I know we have rights but what has our rights got to do with SRE?
(School A-G2.TV)

Rhodri's question reflected a broader pattern observed across group interviews in all schools, where participants expressed curiosity about how their rights could be realised within their school experiences of SRE but lacked clarity about what this might involve in practice. In response to this uncertainty, group discussions

created space to explore how children's rights relate to SRE provision. To support participants' understanding of key aspects of their rights in this context, I introduced examples illustrating how rights can enable young people to be heard, express opinions and be involved in decision-making. This included discussion of relevant Articles of the UNCRC (e.g. Voice [Art. 12], Information [Art. 17], Health [Art. 24], Education aims [Art. 29], and Protection [Art. 34]). These UNCRC articles functioned as prompts for deeper reflection rather than simple information giving. As participants engaged with these examples, several began to re-evaluate their experiences of SRE, moving from abstract references to "rights" towards questioning why those rights were not reflected in practice. This shift highlights how guided discussion enabled participants to connect formal rights frameworks with their lived experiences of school.

I also discussed with participants how scholars, both locally and internationally, recognise that young people have the right to receive SRE that incorporates appropriate teaching methods and pedagogical approaches (WHO 2010; Quinlivan 2018b; Setty and Dobson 2022). This prompted participants to reflect more deeply on Article 12 of the UNCRC and its relevance to their experiences, with many increasingly expressed concerns about the absence of their voices in the design and delivery of SRE. This is explored in more detail in the following section.

4.3 The absence of voice and agency in SRE

Building on participants' emerging awareness of rights discussed in the previous section, this section explores how opportunities to exercise voice and agency within SRE decision-making and curriculum shaping were experienced in practice. Participants' accounts reveal that while some forms of participation were present, these were limited, inconsistent, and often perceived as tokenistic. The subsections that follow examine post-lesson reflection as a constrained form of participation, the absence of consultation across SRE provision, and the relational barriers of trust and respect that further inhibited young people's agency.

4.3.1 Post-lesson reflection as a limited form of participation

Participants' accounts indicate that opportunities to exercise voice and influence over SRE provision within their schools were limited. Rather than describing involvement in shaping SRE content or approach, participants framed their "voice" primarily in relation to post-lesson reflection following sessions facilitated by external agencies. For many, it was unclear whether any SRE taught by school staff included similar opportunities, as participants frequently reported that SRE provided by teachers was either minimal, inconsistent, or not remembered. As a result, the only structured space in which they recalled being asked for their views related specifically to externally run sessions.

Participants discussed how they expressed their voice in the context of being invited to share their views after an SRE lesson led by outside agencies. Some participants offered examples of the questions used to prompt reflection, which focused on "what did you enjoy about the lesson", "what do you remember the most?" and "do you know where your local condom services are?" (School A-G1.TV). Other participants said they remembered completing a post-lesson feedback form because "I put down I learned where the clitoris is" and "I learned about STI's" (School B-G1.TV). These opportunities to express views were associated with specific sessions, including lesson one on the male and female reproductive systems, facilitated by the youth service, and lesson three on sexually transmitted infections, provided by the school nurses.

Some participants across all schools recalled being asked to share their views after SRE lessons. However, participants often struggled to recall which lesson this related to or what purpose their reflections served beyond the lesson itself. While a small number of participants remembered completing feedback forms, most did not describe having opportunities to express views in ways that influenced SRE provision or informed future practice.

Notably, participants appeared to interpret post-lesson reflection as their primary opportunity to express voice within SRE. This perception suggests a narrow framing of participation, in which expressing views was understood as an individual, retrospective activity rather than a meaningful mechanism for influence.

Rather than being actively involved in shaping SRE provision, participants positioned post-lesson reflection as the extent of their agency, highlighting a gap between rights-based principles and practice.

4.3.2 “Why haven’t we been asked?”: Challenging the absence of consultation

To explore whether opportunities for participation had been available earlier in participants’ SRE journeys, I asked young people whether they had been involved in any consultation when they first received the SRE pack in Year 7. This was a significant point in time because the NPT SRE pack, developed in 2014, was intended to be reviewed annually with input from young people, as outlined in Chapter One. During the group interviews, I raised this issue and passed the pack around the groups, which contained all the lessons they should have received to date. This aimed to prompt recollections of any invitations to share their views or influence their SRE curriculum.

Across all schools, participants consistently reported that they had not been given any opportunity to contribute to discussions about their SRE. Several expressed surprise that consultation had even been expected. As Angharad commented, “nobody ever asks us anything about SRE” (School A-G2.TV). Similarly, Phoebe noted that, “teachers never asked us what we think about our SRE” (School A-G2.TV). These accounts point to a shared sense that consultation had not been part of their experience. For some participants, the absence of consultation had clear consequences. Daf reflected that he had “never been asked for his views” and immediately linked this to missing content that mattered to him personally:

Daf: I haven’t been asked about our SRE [...] I would have said about having LGBT information. (School B-G3.TV)

CJ expressed a similar view, noting that they would have asked for more information on gender identity had consultation occurred:

CJ: They definitely haven't asked me views I would have remembered, and I would have asked about gender information. (School B-G4.TV)

These responses highlight a consistent absence of consultation across schools and cohorts, suggesting that young people were excluded from decision making processes when their SRE curriculum was being shaped. For several participants, this lack of voice had tangible consequences. Daf later explained that the absence of LGBT content meant he; "had to look it all up online, and some of it didn't make sense to me" (School B-G3.TV). He also highlighted that much of what he found online was "confusing". This illustrates how the lack of consultation created a reliance on external sources of information. Participants described online information as inconsistent, with some finding it risky or unreliable, while others experienced it as empowering. For example, Lilly spoke positively about using Google to "find everything out and access loads of LGBT stuff and sites". In contrast, other participants avoided searching online due to concerns about misinformation or coming across inappropriate content. These contrasting experiences highlight the risks and inconsistencies that arise when school based SRE does not align with young people's expressed needs. Further concerns raised by participants about accessing online information are explored in Chapter Five.

As the interviews progressed, participants became increasingly interested in how their rights relating to SRE should have been enacted within their schools. This led to discussions around the frequency and timing of consultation. For example, some participants questioned when and how often they should have been asked for their views (School B-G3.TV):

Owen: So how often should we have been asked about our SRE?

Researcher: Once a year after you had the first lessons in the pack [...] end of Yr 7,8,9.

Annabelle: So basically, we should have been asked about what we think about our SRE at the end of each year group? [...] fuming like.

Researcher: Yes, that's what the plan was and agreed by our SRE group in NPT.

Owen: How come they [teachers] don't have to do it then [...] I don't understand why they haven't.

Stacey: So, we have rights, and we can't use them [...] what's the point in that then? Right, I'm annoyed now.

Jay: We are only kids to them bet they think what do we know [...].

Daf: I feel let down, in fact I'm angry.

Many participants, including Annabelle, Stacey, and Daf, expressed feeling “annoyed” and “angry” that they had not been given opportunities over the past four years to raise concerns or influence the SRE curriculum. These emotional responses were not expressed in isolation but emerged through group interaction, as participants echoed, reinforced, and built upon one another's reactions. As the discussion progressed, expressions of frustration became more noticeable, suggesting a shared recognition of exclusion that contributed to a collective emotional dynamic within the group. Daf, for example, articulated frustration at the absence of LGBTQ+ content in SRE, describing how, as someone who now identified as gay, he felt “let down” by never being asked what he needed from these lessons.

Annabelle expressed strong feelings about the lack of discussion around issues such as pornography and sexting. She responded “fuming” when reflecting on missed opportunities to share her views. Stacey, meanwhile, questioned the value of rights that could not be exercised in practice, asking “what's the point in that then?” and arguing that young people should have a say in decisions such as who “teaches us SRE”. This highlights that decisions about providing SRE, not only curriculum content, form a core part of their rights to meaningful participation. These emotional responses did not emerge in isolation but intensified as the group conversation unfolded. As participants collectively realised that consultation had been intended but never enacted, their feelings of frustration and anger grew. This moment illustrates how dialogue enabled young people to re-evaluate and re-interpret their past experiences of SRE through a rights-based lens,

transforming what had previously been accepted as “normal” into something understood as unfair, exclusionary, and inconsistent with their rights.

Statements such as “that’s so unfair” and “why haven’t we been asked?” were common throughout the interviews, echoing Stacey’s earlier frustration with the absence of consultation in SRE. Stacey, in particular, questioned the value of having rights that could not be exercised in practice, stating: We have rights to participate and say what we think about SRE, but we can’t use them. Her comments also gestured toward practical changes that could improve participation. She suggested, for example, “more lessons and fewer people per class” to create safer spaces for discussion. However, these suggestions emerged from a broader sense of frustration with being excluded from decision-making (School B-G3.TV). This absence of consultation can also be understood as reinforcing hierarchical power relations, limiting psychological safety by signalling that young people’s contributions are neither expected nor valued within this context.

While most participants reported never being consulted about their SRE, where consultation did occur, it was often limited in scope and lacked meaningful follow-up. A small number of participants recalled being asked for their views in relation to a single SRE lesson, most commonly the Year 9 pregnancy lesson developed as part of the NPT SRE pack introduced in 2014. For example, some participants remembered brief discussions about specific lesson materials, such as the pregnancy images used in one session:

Beth: I only remember Mrs. [teacher] talking to us about one of these SRE lessons... not all of them though. (School C-G5.TV)

However, participants did not recall being asked for feedback beyond these isolated moments, nor did they describe any changes to their SRE resulting from their input. This suggests that consultation, where it occurred, functioned as a one-off activity rather than an ongoing participatory process. The absence of feedback or visible impact limited opportunities for young people to exercise voice and agency in a meaningful way. As Holland (2017b) argues, feedback is a fundamental element of meaningful participation, as it demonstrates that

children's views have been heard and valued. Without such follow-up, consultation risks becoming tokenistic (Hart 1992), undermining trust and discouraging future engagement (Lundy 2018; Effevottu 2022).

Together, these reflections highlight a critical gap between policy intentions and lived experience. While rights-based SRE frameworks are embedded within policy, participants' accounts suggest that these rights are not being meaningfully enacted in practice. This finding reflects wider concerns within the literature, where although rights-based approaches to SRE are increasingly adopted, their implementation is often constrained by structural, cultural, and pedagogical barriers (Ringrose and Renold 2012; McGeeney and Kehily 2016; Quinlivan 2018; Bragg et al. 2022).

Recent research further reinforces this disconnect between policy and practice. Ponsford et al. (2024), for example, found that despite broad support for statutory RSE guidance, implementation was frequently undermined by limited resources, insufficient teacher training, and competing school priorities. Similarly, the Sex Education Forum (2022) reported that many young people continue to lack access to comprehensive and inclusive SRE, with few opportunities to influence lesson content or delivery. Renold and McGeeney's research review (2017b) also observed that young people often receive minimal SRE and feel it is not taken seriously. King-Hill (2020b), drawing on NSPCC National Case Review material, similarly shows that young people consistently seek greater participation in decisions about their SRE. Together, these studies echo the concerns raised by participants in this research, illustrating how structural, cultural, and pedagogical barriers continue to hinder the meaningful enactment of rights-based SRE in schools.

4.3.3 Respect, trust and relational barriers to “voice” and “agency”

Relational participation frameworks (Lundy 2007; Mannion 2012) emphasise the importance of listening, responsiveness and reciprocity in shaping meaningful engagement. Existing evidence shows that young people are more willing to participate in SRE when lessons are dialogic, responsive and grounded in their

lived experiences rather than adult-centred or lecture-based approaches (Cook and Sather 2006; Renold and McGeeney 2017a; Setty and Dobson 2022; Ollis et al. 2019b). Participants' accounts reflected these dynamics clearly. The consistent absence of consultation in SRE was consistently interpreted as a lack of respect and trust:

Kate: How do they know what we want in our lessons then if they don't ask us? That's so unfair. (School B-G4.TV)

Jenna: Are they afraid we will tell them how to do their job? (School B-G4.TV).

Rhydian: Even though we have to respect them, they don't respect us. (School A-G1.TV)

Researcher: What makes you think they don't respect you?

Rhydian: It's obvious in it [...] they don't ask us what we think [...] cos they don't trust us. (School A-G1.TV)

Echoing Jenna's comment, many participants believed that teachers did not respect young people's opinions, often positioning them as "too young" or insufficiently knowledgeable about sex and relationships. As Rhydian's comments illustrate, participants felt strongly about not being respected or trusted to share their views on a subject that directly impacts their learning and lives. For them, respect meant educators caring about young people's learning, feelings, and needs. Importantly, this was not only about being listened to, but about having their contributions taken seriously and acted upon.

Many participants considered opportunities to share their views on SRE a "waste of time," not because of disinterest but due to repeated experiences where questions went unanswered or views were dismissed. Disengagement was therefore understood as a rational response to non-responsiveness, rooted in a broader lack of trust that their input would lead to meaningful change. Participants felt their contributions would not be taken seriously, their questions dismissed, and no improvement made:

Ed: Well, they [teacher] don't listen to us and don't answer our question in class [...] they think we are mucking about and their embarrassed so they're not going

to ask us about our SRE are they cos they don't even answer our questions [...] so that's a waste of our time like. (School B-G4.TV)

Jay: What's the point they're not going to listen to us are they. (School B-G3.TV)

Stacey: Like they're going to take us seriously. (School B-G3.TV)

These comments illustrate how teachers' lack of responsiveness led participants to believe that consultation would make no practical difference. Others observed: "we are the ones who know what we need, so why don't they ask us?" (Jenna: School B-G4. TV) and "they just think we are only kids, what do we know?" (Jay: School B-G3.TV). This frustration reflects wider evidence showing that young people's perspectives are frequently overlooked in attempts to reform SRE, despite being recognised as experts in their own lives (Pound et al. 2016; Renold et al. 2023).

Age-based assumptions played a central role in shaping these perceptions, with several participants stating that teachers saw them as "not old enough to know what we want" (Jenna: School B-G4.TV). As Cerys noted, consultation alone did not guarantee influence:

Cerys: If teachers ask us what we want in our SRE that doesn't mean they will have to listen to us does it? (School B-G5.TV)

These assumptions were widely perceived as structural barriers to meaningful participation, reinforcing the belief that young people's contributions would be dismissed regardless of consultation.

These findings align with research showing how adult discomfort, embarrassment and power dynamics undermine meaningful engagement. Teachers often report feeling embarrassed when teaching SRE (Measor et al. 2000; Pound et al. 2016), while young people frequently feel unheard even when asked for their views (Ollis et al. 2019c). Participants in this study similarly described feeling dismissed when highlighting needed changes to SRE, further entrenching disengagement. However, one group offered a contrasting perspective, suggesting that teacher openness could improve the relational climate:

Kate: I think miss [teacher] would be open to make changes to our SRE if we talked to her about it. (School B-G4.TV)

Kate's comment indicates that where relational trust exists, participants feel more confident in sharing their views. This highlights how teacher attitude and relational conditions, not merely consultation methods, shape whether contributions feel valued. Across the data, participants expressed a persistent sense of disconnection from consultation processes that were intended to empower them but often felt tokenistic. These insights align with youth participation research and relational pedagogy, which emphasise that trust, reciprocity and authenticity are essential for meaningful engagement (Lundy 2007; Mannion 2012). The contrast between groups who felt dismissed and those who perceived teachers as receptive underscores the critical role of relational dynamics in shaping young people's willingness to participate. Meaningful SRE consultation must therefore be embedded within a culture of respect, trust and responsiveness, issues explored further in Chapters Five and Six and synthesised in Chapter Seven.

Participants described respect as relational and reciprocal, demonstrated through consultation, responsiveness and openness. As one participant noted, "If they respected us, they'd ask us what we think, not just teach us what they think we need" (CJ: School B-G4.TV). Overall, participants perceived SRE as shaped primarily by adult assumptions rather than young people's lived realities. The absence of consultation signalled a relational failure rather than an oversight, identified through their own reflective analyses of school power dynamics. Participants also articulated how teachers could demonstrate greater trust and respect:

Lilly: Give us our rights [...] you know to talk with them [teachers] about SRE. (School A-G1.TV)

Zen: We need more control of our SRE. (School A-G2.TV)

Darcy: They need to take our opinions seriously. (School A-G2.TV)

Kate: Don't ignore us. (School B-G4.TV)

Many described feeling a lack of control over their education, stating that when they gave their opinions on SRE, “they just ignore us,” and that teachers assumed they were “not responsible enough to talk about sex education” (School A-G1.TV). Participants consistently positioned themselves as experts in their own lives:

Sadie: We are the ones who know what we need, so why don’t they ask us? (School B-G4.TV).

Recent research supports involving young people directly in shaping SRE. Renold et al. (2023a) found that young people want SRE to be co-constructed and creative and feel excluded when adults make assumptions without consultation. Pound et al. (2016) similarly highlight how SRE often fails to reflect young people’s lived realities. Some participants, however, provided examples of feeling respected. When educators created safe, non-judgmental spaces, this was noted positively:

Sam: the youth worker didn’t laugh or judge us; she just answered every question we asked. (School A-G1.TV)

Rhydian: when the school nurse delivered our STI lesson we were told we could ask her anything. (School A-G1.TV)

Beth also described respectful practice when an SRE teacher discussed the pregnancy lesson with them beforehand and asked for their opinions (School C-G5.TV). These examples demonstrate how respect emerges through relational practice, how educators frame lessons, invite questions, and position young people as legitimate contributors (Cook and Sather 2006; Ollis et al. 2019b). Participants’ positive accounts of youth workers and school nurses highlight how non-judgmental responses contributed to increased psychological safety, enabling more open questioning and participation compared to teacher-led contexts. Evidence suggests that respect is fostered when SRE is engaging, discussion-based and responsive to lived experiences (Renold and McGeeney 2017a; Setty and Dobson 2022). Participants’ accounts echoed this, emphasising the need to be consulted and taken seriously. In the few instances where their views shaped lesson content, SRE felt more relevant and respectful.

Many described disappointment at not having opportunities to influence SRE, particularly regarding inclusive LGBTQ+ and gender content. The lack of consultation signalled a wider absence of trust in their capacity to contribute meaningfully. As noted widely in the literature, meaningful participation requires time, commitment and openness (Quinlivan 2018a; Ollis et al. 2019c; UNCRC 2023). Without young people's involvement, SRE often fails to reflect their lived realities (Allen 2005a).

This theme aligns with research emphasising the importance of centring young people's voices when shaping relevant SRE (King-Hill 2024b). Given that RSE is now compulsory in Wales and legally underpinned by children's rights, implementation should authentically reflect young people's experiences. Avoiding tokenistic engagement is essential (Setty and Dobson 2022). Participants also stressed the need for open conversations so that practitioners can provide information that supports their health and safety (House of Commons Education Committee 2015). Creating time and space for active participation aligns with rights-based, co-produced approaches grounded in young people's voices and lived experiences (Ollis et al. 2019a; Donaldson 2015).

4.5 Reimagining rights-based SRE: Participants' suggestions for improving participation

This section synthesises participants' recommendations for how rights-based SRE could be more meaningfully enacted in schools. Participants offered a range of recommendations on how schools could engage with them and ensure their voices are central to improving SRE lessons. Their suggestions focused on embedding meaningful participation, enhancing relevance, and operationalising a rights-based approach to SRE. One key recommendation was the introduction of youth-led SRE forums in every school, with representation from each year group. These forums were viewed as a mechanism through which pupils could share their views and feed into wider youth participation structures:

Phoebe: Why can't we have a SRE youth forums in each school [...] one pupil from every year group and feedback to the youth council. (School A-G2.TV)

Building on this proposal, participants suggested that these forums could be supported by external partners such as the NPT Youth Service or Youth Council members who are pupils within their schools. This support was seen as a way of strengthening communication channels between pupils and staff responsible for SRE delivery, ensuring that young people's feedback was not only gathered but acted upon:

Angharad: Could we have someone from the Youth Council to help us [...] you know like [pupils name] who sits on the Youth Council in our school? Then they [pupils name] could tell the teachers what we want in SRE. (School A-G2.TV)

In addition to structural changes, participants recommended piloting lesson content through these forums. This would allow pupils to help shape lessons that are relevant, engaging, fun and interactive. As Jay suggested, we could trial lessons in the SRE forums to make sure the topics we want are covered (School A-G2.TV).

Alongside face-to-face engagement, some participants proposed conducting annual online surveys to gather wider pupil perspectives before SRE lessons were planned. While surveys were seen as a useful tool for capturing broad views, participants emphasised that these should complement rather than replace opportunities for dialogue with SRE practitioners:

CJ: We could have a yearly SRE survey done online like the schools do with other things they want to know about from us; we could tell them [teachers] what we want then. (School B-G4.TV)

Recognising that some young people may feel uncomfortable discussing sensitive topics openly, participants also proposed the use of anonymous feedback mechanisms. Anonymous questionnaires were viewed as particularly important for enabling honest expression, and a post-box system was suggested as a practical way to facilitate this:

Zen: We could have a post box set up in the hall and we could post our questionnaire [...] that way we could be honest and say what we want discussed in SRE without putting our names on them. (School A-G2.TV)

Another recommendation from participants focused on peer-led engagement, inspired by their experiences of Crucial Crew, an annual multi-agency education programme in NPT that uses interactive learning to explore issues such as rights, safety, and responsibility with young people. Some participants explained how they had previously taken part in facilitating peer education workshops through Crucial Crew, such as raising awareness about hate crime. Drawing on this model, they suggested that young people could facilitate peer-led SRE awareness sessions within future Crucial Crew events. These sessions could both inform peers about their SRE rights and gather their views, which would then be fed back to SRE practitioners within schools and external youth services:

Nieve: I think we should have peer-ed sessions once a year, you know like the ones in Crucial Crew and pupils could ask the questions to the kids in their year group about what stuff they want to talk about and how they would like lessons to be delivered. (School B-G4.TV)

Finally, many participants suggested running annual awareness campaigns in schools to increase understanding of young people's rights to SRE among both pupils and staff. Participants felt that greater rights awareness would enable young people to exercise agency and challenge existing practices, supporting change in both curriculum content and pedagogical approaches:

Jo: We could run a campaign every year in school to make sure pupils and teachers know about our SRE rights [...] I think that would help us get our rights and change our SRE lessons, because everyone will know then wont they. (School B-G3.TV)

Collectively, these recommendations highlight young people's desire for sustained and meaningful involvement in shaping their SRE. Their proposals for youth forums, peer-led engagement, and anonymous feedback mechanisms align with research advocating for co-produced, rights-based approaches to RSE (Setty 2023). Scholars argue that when students actively participate in curriculum

design, education becomes more relevant, engaging, and empowering (Cook-Sather 2006). Embedding these practices therefore has the potential to strengthen both the realisation of participants' rights and the overall quality of SRE provision, providing a foundation for the pedagogical and structural considerations explored in the following sections.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter explored young people's views, understandings and concerns regarding a rights-based approach to SRE in their school. Drawing on interview data, it showed that participants had not been meaningfully included in shaping their SRE curriculum, despite policy commitments to pupil participation. Although many demonstrated curiosity and growing awareness of their rights when given space to reflect, the findings reveal a persistent lack of voice and agency, with participants describing frustration, exclusion and distrust toward educators. Perceived tokenism and a lack of respect were recurring themes, highlighting emotional and relational barriers to meaningful engagement. For some, particularly LGBTQ+ and gender-diverse young people, the lack of participation also meant limited access to inclusive and identity-relevant SRE. This demonstrates how rights to voice and rights to representation are closely interconnected. These findings also highlight tensions between rights; voice and agency, where opportunities for young people to express their views did not always translate into meaningful influence over SRE provision. Participation was shaped by power relations and varying levels of psychological safety within group settings, which influenced how confidently young people engaged and how their contributions were taken up.

Participants offered practical suggestions for improving SRE, including youth-led forums, co-produced lesson planning and more responsive pedagogical approaches. These recommendations align with wider research advocating participatory, rights-based education (Lundy 2007; Renold and McGeeney 2017a; Setty and Dobson 2022). The findings also emphasise the need for a cultural shift in how educators engage with young people, one that prioritises trust, respect and genuine participation. This has implications for teacher training, curriculum design

and the integration of youth voice in future SRE provision. This reinforces the importance of creating conditions in which young people's voice can translate into meaningful agency within SRE.

Chapter Five

“Nobody tells us anything good about sex”: Risk focused SRE

5.1 Introduction

Ed: Why do everyone tell us about all the bad things about having sex, but nobody tells us anything good about sex. (School B-G3.TV)

Stacey: Yeh like, don't have sex cos you'll get pregnant or catch a STI. (School B-G3.TV)

Ed and Stacey's reflections capture a recurring theme in the data: young people experienced SRE as overwhelmingly focused on risk, warnings, and negative outcomes, with little attention to pleasure, emotions, or agency. This chapter examines how such risk-centred approaches shaped participants' understandings and feelings about sex and relationships, and is organised around three interrelated themes: Sex as Danger, exploring how repeated emphasis on STIs, pregnancy, and legal risks framed sex as dangerous and shaped emotional responses; Silencing Pleasure, examining how the absence of discussion about pleasure, desire, and positive experiences limited understandings of sexual wellbeing; and Reimagining Affirmative SRE, which captures young people's suggestions for more balanced and inclusive approaches that recognise desire, emotion, and agency across gender identities. Together, these themes illustrate how risk-focused SRE shaped participants' perceptions and what they believe more affirmative, youth-centred provision should include.

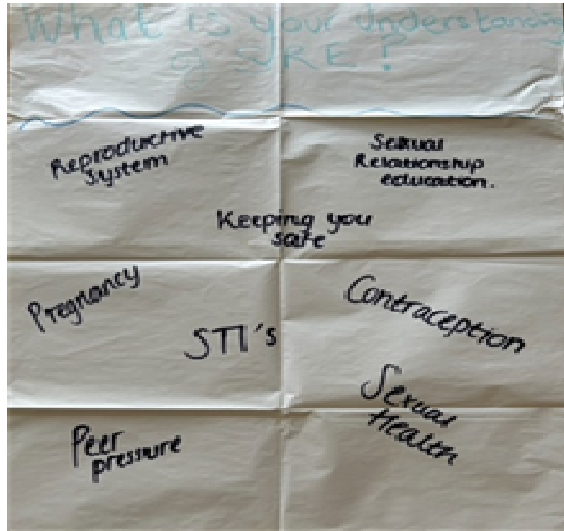
5.2 Sex as Danger: The emotional impact of risk-focused messaging

At the beginning of the first workshop, participants were asked to write their collective understanding of SRE on flipchart paper. Working in small groups, participants discussed their ideas and nominated one peer to scribe their responses, which were then shared and discussed within each workshop. This activity was designed to capture participants' baseline understandings of SRE, using their own language, prior to engagement with other workshop activities.

Figure 1 presents an example of a group-scribed response from this activity. Rather than reproducing all written responses verbatim, I have summarised the most frequently occurring topics and terms across all participating schools below. This list reflects the common areas that participants associated with SRE at the outset of the study:

- Contraception (e.g. female and male barrier contraception)
- Prevention of unplanned pregnancy and STI's
- How to access emergency contraception
- Reproductive systems
- Sex, relationships and love (e.g. love relating to healthy relationships)
- Safe sex (e.g. relating to unplanned pregnancy and STI's)
- Alcohol and its effects (relating to the use of contraception and sex)
- Sexual health (e.g. relating to healthy relationships, the absence of STI's and not getting pregnant)
- Sexuality (e.g. relating to LGBTQ+ relationships)
- Peer pressure (e.g. relating to pressure from their peers/partners to have sex)

Figure 1: Workshop/Station One: Sample of a group-scribed responses to "What Is Your Understanding of SRE?"



Groups of participants across different schools approached the task in varied ways. For example, School A (Groups One and Two) each used one side of the flipchart paper, while School B (Groups Three and Four) and School C (Group Five) shared one side between them. I use the term “physical risks” to refer to the topics young people most frequently associated with SRE, including pregnancy, STIs, condoms, and contraception. Although some groups offered multiple responses and included terms such as reproductive systems, sex, relationships, and love, their written contributions predominantly centred on physical risks, particularly pregnancy, STIs, and access to emergency contraception.

When asked what first came to mind when invited to scribe their understanding of SRE, participants’ immediate verbal responses echoed these themes, with most referring to condoms, pregnancy, STIs, and “safe sex.” Participants often used language focused on prevention, protection, and avoiding negative consequences. Participants spoke about “not getting pregnant,” “not catching anything,” and “using condoms to be safe” (FN). These responses indicate that participants’ initial understandings of SRE were narrowly centred on physical risk and harm prevention, with little reference to feelings, communication, intimacy, pleasure, or how relationships are experienced.

5.2.1 Gender diversity and the limits of risk-focused SRE

While most participants framed SRE around pregnancy, condoms, and STIs, this risk-centred baseline was experienced very differently by the three gender-diverse young people in the study: one trans female, one trans male, and one non-binary participant. For these participants, SRE organised around heterosexual risk and reproduction did not feel complete; it felt misaligned with their identities, bodies, and likely relationship contexts, highlighting the limits of a cisnormative and heteronormative curriculum. UK research similarly shows that gender-diverse adolescents often encounter school environments, including curricula, that marginalise their identities or fail to reflect their lived realities (Bower-Brown et al. 2023).

All three gender-diverse participants noted that classroom conversations centred almost exclusively on penile-vaginal sex, pregnancy risk, and “safe sex” framed as condom use (FN). This framing implicitly assumed cisgender bodies and heterosexual relationships as the normative standard. These experiences align with UK evidence showing that heterocentric SRE marginalises LGBTQ+ young people, leading them to feel excluded and disengaged, with reduced sexual-health literacy (Epps et al. 2023).

For the trans male and trans female participants, the dominance of pregnancy-based messaging was especially alienating. Neither felt that lessons about “girls getting pregnant” or “boys needing to use condoms” were relevant to their bodies or relationships (FN). This aligns with research showing that trans and non-binary adolescents often navigate school systems strongly structured around binary gender norms, contributing to feelings of exclusion and discomfort when their identities are not represented (Bower-Brown et al. 2023).

The non-binary participant expressed this exclusion directly, describing SRE as “not for us” and “talking about people who aren’t me” (CJ: School B-G4.TV). UK evidence supports this interpretation, with a rapid review of non-inclusive sex education showing that it contributes to disengagement, reduced sexual health literacy, and poorer relational and health outcomes for LGBTQ+ young people (Epps et al. 2023). This is particularly significant given the Welsh Government’s RSE Code, which requires an inclusive, rights-based approach that enables

learners to understand diverse relationship types, gender identities, and sexualities, including LGBTQ+ lives (Welsh Government 2022a). International Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) guidance similarly emphasises the importance of inclusive representation of gender and sexual diversity, noting that exclusion undermines young people's agency, wellbeing, and access to accurate and relevant knowledge (UNESCO 2018).

These issues were echoed in this study by the gender-diverse participants' accounts, which revealed how a risk-dominated, cisgender/heteronormative curriculum not only limits knowledge but reproduces inequities in emotional safety, relevance, and relational confidence. Young people across the UK have called for SRE/RSE that is confident, caring, inclusive, and attentive to the diverse realities of gender and sexuality (Renold et al. 2023b).

In short, centering pregnancy and STI avoidance as the organising principle of SRE risks erasing the realities of trans and non-binary young people. Ensuring that SRE meaningfully reflects gender-diverse experiences, through language, scenarios, bodies, and relationships, is not an optional "add-on", but a core requirement of inclusive, rights-based RSE in Wales and internationally. These structural exclusions carried emotional consequences, shaping how young people, across identities, interpreted risk-focused SRE and how they felt within these lessons.

5.2.2 Why risk dominates: adult concerns and institutional pressures

When asked in group workshops why participants' initial thoughts focused on STIs and pregnancy, they frequently cited previous SRE lessons that emphasised danger, shame, or avoidance. A small number of participants mentioned topics such as consent, emotional wellbeing, or sexual pleasure; however, these were typically framed in relation to specific lessons or interventions rather than as part of a broader understanding of SRE. This suggests that participants' risk-focused interpretations were shaped by curriculum content and provision:

Angharad: Because that's what we talked about in our last SRE lesson to stop us getting pregnant. (School A-G2.TV)

Rhys: I thought about STI talks we had from the school nurse and how to use a condom. (School A-G1.TV)

Jay: I thought about consent and peer pressure lessons we had. (School B-G3.TV)

These insights, echoed across several groups, suggest a shared understanding of SRE as primarily a protective mechanism. Given this strong emphasis on risk, I explored participants' views on why they believed SRE educators in NPT focused so heavily on this aspect, and how this emphasis was understood by participants themselves. This helped me to consider whether risk-focused messaging was interpreted as a form of care and safeguarding, or as a strategy rooted in control and fear, as well as to identify which aspects of sex and relationships were marginalised or omitted within this approach. To examine this further, I asked participants: "why do you think SRE educators in NPT focus on the risks when talking about sex and relationships with young people?" Their responses consistently centred on adult concerns about preventing pregnancy and STIs:

Kate: Cos that's what it's about innit how we supposed to use condoms to stop us getting pregnant. (School B-G4.TV)

CJ: It's all about contraception, STIs because they don't want us to get pregnant or catch a STI. (School B-G4.TV)

Corinne: Who are they?

CJ: Teachers and other adults like our parents. (School B-G4.TV)

These responses reflect a broader perception among participants that SRE is shaped by adult anxieties, particularly those of teachers and parents. This framing also reflects underlying power dynamics, where adult authority shapes the boundaries of what can be discussed, potentially limiting psychological safety by positioning certain aspects of sexuality as inappropriate or off-limits. This interpretation emerges across multiple group discussions, with individual

participants describing how SRE framed sex as shameful or wrong. Jay's comment illustrates this perception:

Jay: It's like they don't want us to even think about sex, like it's bad or dirty or something. That makes us feel ashamed just for wanting to know about it." (School B-G3.TV)

Jay's interpretation aligns with Fine's (1988) argument that excluding discussions of pleasure from SRE contributes to shame and misinformation, particularly for marginalised young people. More recent research continues to support this view, highlighting how pleasure-inclusive approaches, understood here as those that integrate pleasure, desire and emotional wellbeing alongside considerations of risk, consent, safety and responsibility, can foster sexual agency, reduce stigma, and offer a more realistic and balanced understanding of sexuality (Zaneva et al. 2022; Van Ditzhuijzen and Overeem 2025).

Framed in this way, introducing pleasure does not replace harm prevention messages but broadens a risk-dominated approach, acknowledging that not all sexual activity is framed solely by reproduction or danger. Such integrated conversations can promote body awareness, enable communication about consent, challenge harmful norms, support young people's rights, and foster equitable, respectful relationships (Ford et al. 2021c), aligning with Welsh Government (2022) aspirations for RSE that is positive and protective, empowering, and rights-based.

Further discussions on the reasons for focusing on risk revealed that some participants believed institutional image and social stigma also influence how SRE is delivered in NPT. They noted: it would look bad for the school if one of the girls got pregnant (School B-G3.TV). When asked why, participants elaborated:

Annabelle: Well parents would think they're not doing their job in teaching us stuff to stop us getting pregnant. (School B-G3.TV)

Stacey: Everyone would be talking about it in the village, you know what people are like and that would be embarrassing for the school. (School B-G3.TV)

These comments reflect how community perceptions and institutional reputational concerns shape SRE provision. This aligns with research showing that adult-driven, risk-focused approaches often exclude emotional and relational dimensions of sexual health (Marshall 2024). Such approaches can undermine young people's engagement and fail to reflect their lived realities, reinforcing the need for youth-centered, inclusive education (Pound et al. 2016; Allen 2024a).

Many participants' experiences of embarrassment, fear, and frustration with risk-focused SRE further illustrate how shame continues to shape their learning. As Irvine (2009) argues, despite decades of advocacy for more pleasure-inclusive approaches, shame remains embedded within SRE that prioritises danger and community judgement, while excluding pleasure and emotional wellbeing. The community scrutiny and reputational anxieties described above help to explain why such shame-based, risk-focused messages persist. This dynamic is explored in greater depth below, through participants' emotional responses to fear-led SRE messaging.

5.2.3 Fear and frustration: young people's emotional responses

Many participants were openly critical of their SRE lessons, focusing primarily on what they referred to as the “dangers” and “bad things” relating to sex.” Furthermore, it became clear that participants understood “danger” to mean the physical risks to themselves, specifically relating to pregnancy and STIs as discussed earlier (5.2). This sentiment is clearly reflected in Stacey's response (Quotation Two, 5.1): “yeh like, don't have sex cos you'll get pregnant or catch a STI”. Such comments highlight a recurring viewpoint in the data, that risk-focused messaging dominates participants' experiences of SRE. Several participants across the group workshops expressed similar concerns, often stating that the most memorable aspects of their SRE lessons were what they described as the “frightening things” or “frightening messages” they received about engaging in sex:

Angharad: Its dangerous to have sex. (School A-G2. FN)

Lilly: Having sex can make you pregnant and ruin your life. (School A-G1. FN)

Owen: If you have sex, you can get STIs. (School B-G3. FN)

These responses reflect a consistent pattern of frustration among participants, with many highlighting a misalignment between the dominant narratives of “danger” and “risk” in their SRE lessons and their lived experiences. For instance, Angharad (School A-G2.TV) discussed feeling confused by the framing of sex as inherently dangerous. She explained: “the people I know who are in relationships, in my family and my friends, don’t seem to be in any danger.” Angharad noted that “I am not aware of anyone in my school being pregnant or having an STI,” which led her to question, “Does this mean they’re not having sex then?” Her interpretation of “danger” was closely tied to the risk of contracting an STI or experiencing an unplanned pregnancy, highlighting a disconnect between the risk-focused messaging in SRE and Angharad’s observations of everyday relationships. These emotional responses were reinforced through group interaction, as participants responded to one another’s accounts with agreement, shared examples, and affirming reactions, indicating that frustration was collectively produced rather than individually held. As discussions progressed, expressions of fear and concern became more pronounced, reflecting a shared emotional response to risk-focused messaging.

Rather than feeling informed or empowered, many expressed concerns about the emotional impact of narrowly framed lessons. For example, Daf (School B-G3. TV) spoke about being: worried about having sex for the first time, while others including Nieve (School B-G4.TV) who described feeling; “too frightened to have sex because of the dangers we are told about in SRE lessons,” which for some began to undermine trust in the lessons themselves. The majority of participants presented their understanding of frightening messages in ways that were consistently linked to negative outcomes relating to pregnancy and STIs. Existing evidence shows that young people frequently express frustration with SRE that emphasises danger and negative consequences, generating fear, shame, and

disengagement while neglecting emotional, relational, and pleasurable dimensions (Setty and Hunt 2024).

Lilly (School A-G1.TV), recalled an SRE lesson in which having sex as a young person was discussed in terms of its potential to “ruin your life” through pregnancy. Lilly was able to give examples of family members, including her mum, who became pregnant at an early age and for whom this did not “ruin their lives”. For example, Lilly stated: “my mum was 17 but it didn’t ruin our lives, did it?” Lilly described feeling embarrassed during the lesson when told that having sex as a young person could ruin your life if you became pregnant. She explained that this embarrassment stemmed from the fact that she herself was the result of her mum’s early pregnancy, and that all her friends were aware of her situation. She went on to explain that she felt so upset that, upon returning home, she discussed both the statement and her experience of the lesson with her mum. Lilly appeared frustrated and stated: “teachers are not always right.”

Lilly’s account reflects findings from qualitative UK research with young people, which has shown how risk-focused SRE messages can generate shame and emotional distress, particularly when they conflict with young people’s family experiences and lived realities (Renold et al 2023b). Irvine’s (2009) sociological analysis of sex education in the United States similarly demonstrates how pregnancy-focused, fear-based messages have historically positioned young people’s sexuality as dangerous, while sidelining more holistic perspectives that emphasise care, resilience, and emotional wellbeing. I was aware of Lilly’s frustration and took steps to validate her feelings, ensuring she felt seen, heard, and safe within the group before leaving the room. I also signposted Lilly to her local RADS service should she wish to discuss the matter further. Lilly’s experience highlights the emotional toll of fear-based messaging in SRE, particularly when it interconnects with personal and familial histories. Her frustration and embarrassment reflect how dominant narratives around teen pregnancy, such as the idea that it “ruins your life”, can be deeply stigmatizing, especially for young people from working-class backgrounds, like many of my participants. When young people cannot recognise their own lives in these

messages, there is a risk that they reject not only the message itself but also the wider SRE curriculum, reducing trust, relevance and engagement.

Drawing on a sociological analysis of teenage pregnancy discourses, Brown (2016) argues that such messages are often rooted in moral and social anxieties about class, responsibility, and respectability, rather than evidence-based or youth-centred sexual health education. For Lilly, whose mother became pregnant at 17, the lesson not only felt inaccurate but also personally invalidating. Similarly, Daniel's (2017) analysis of how teen pregnancy is represented within education and social policy contexts suggests that young parenthood is frequently framed as a personal failure, a framing that reinforces stigma and contributes to the reproduction of social inequality. Lilly's declaration that "teachers are not always right" speaks to a broader need for inclusive, emotionally relevant SRE that acknowledges diverse lived experiences. Rather than functioning simply as a means of transmitting information, SRE shapes how young people understand sexuality, responsibility, and risk, not just the facts they are taught.

Setty and Hunt's (2024) critique of fear-based SRE highlights how such pedagogies construct sexual knowledge through shame and fear, positioning young people in ways that feel judgmental and emotionally unsafe. Cense and Ganzevoort (2018) similarly argue that dominant SRE discourses restrict young people's agency and reproduce shame, particularly when pleasure, desire and relational dimensions of sexuality are omitted.

These critiques align with Kehily's (2002) ethnographic analysis of how young people learn about sexuality within school cultures, showing how moralised and risk-laden framings often fail to resonate with young people's lived experiences, particularly those from working-class backgrounds. Fine's (1988) seminal work likewise demonstrates how school-based sex education has historically silenced desire and reinforced classed and gendered forms of moral judgement. Participants' expressions of frustration in this study can be understood as affective responses to these broader narratives, especially when SRE messages conflicted with their lived experiences and family contexts. For instance, Lilly's view that "teachers are not always right" reflects her recognition that moralised

constructions of teenage pregnancy as “life-ruining” did not align with her family experiences. These classed inequalities matter because fear-based narratives around pregnancy (“it ruins your life”) disproportionately stigmatise working-class young women, who are statistically more likely to experience early pregnancy or abortion, with young women in the most deprived areas almost twice as likely to undergo abortion as those in the least deprived areas (Solomon et al. 2024). This helps explain why Lilly and others described these messages as disconnected from, and judgmental about, their family realities

Similarly, Stacey and Annabelle expressed frustration that SRE appeared shaped by fears of community judgement and institutional reputation rather than by young people’s emotional needs or questions. In this sense, frustration operates as an affective response to moral panic, signaling young people’s awareness of, and resistance to, risk-focused narratives that portray their sexuality as inherently dangerous

Ford et al. (2021b) further observe that pleasure remains largely absent from school-based SRE due to entrenched societal anxieties about youth sexuality. They argue that discussions of pleasure are often treated as “dangerous” or threatening to social, political and religious norms, particularly when they fall outside heteronormative expectations. This analysis extends the frustrations expressed by participants, including Lilly, and highlights young people’s desire for more balanced, inclusive and emotionally meaningful approaches to SRE.

5.2.4 Risk-focused messaging beyond the classroom: parental and familial influences

In all groups, many participants highlighted that the risk-focused messages they receive about sex and relationships are not confined to formal educational settings but are also communicated within the home. Several participants explained that these messages mostly centre on unplanned pregnancy. Many girls described parents, guardians, and siblings warning them about the dangers of getting pregnant if they had sex. As Nieve (School B-G4.TV) stated: “they tell

us that to frighten us not to have sex”. These warnings were commonly framed as deliberate attempts to deter sexual activity through fear.

Boys also described receiving fear-based messages at home, though these tended to focus on responsibility and long-term consequences. For example, Ben (School B-G4.TV) recalled his father telling him, “if you get a girl pregnant you will be tied to her for the rest of your life”, which Ben interpreted as an attempt to “frighten me and stop me having sex with my girlfriend”. When asked about the impact of this message, Ben explained: “it did frighten me and made me think about what could happen if I had sex with my girlfriend”. Other boys in Ben’s group discussed how this warning implied not only being tied to a child, but also to a partner, suggesting a sense of permanence that they perceived as potentially unwanted. Girls in the same group agreed but emphasised that such situations could also be difficult and complex for the girlfriend, particularly in relation to financial pressures and the possibility of raising a child alone (School B-G4.TV).

Research evidence from the UK Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (DfE 2021) regarding perceptions of SRE highlights that when school-based SRE is perceived as lacking or ineffective, young people often turn to family members for information and advice regarding sexual health. These familial messages frequently continue to focus on risk, particularly unplanned pregnancy and STIs, and can significantly shape young people’s sexual decision-making (Hurst et al. 2022).

5.2.5 Curiosity about local sexual health realities

The majority of participants in all group interviews questioned the strong emphasis placed on health-related risks, particularly STIs and unintended pregnancy, presented to them in SRE lessons. They also critiqued similar risk-focused messages received outside school, especially from family and friends. While pregnancy was not framed by participants as inherently physically harmful, it was frequently positioned within SRE as a negative outcome or consequence of sexual activity. Participants raised questions which reflected a

desire to move beyond such warnings and understand the facts relating to what they perceived as risks on a local level:

Sadie: How worried should we be about STIs? (School B-G4.TV)

Tom: How many young people in Neath Port Talbot catch STIs? (School A-G1.TV)

Beth: How many girls get pregnant in Neath Port Talbot in our age? (School B-G3.TV)

Jenna: We need facts. (School B-G4.TV)

Similar to Sadie, Tom and Beth, other participants' questions reflected a shared effort to understand the scale of sexual health issues and feelings of worry, and what they described as trying to understand "how bad is the problem?" Some participants showed a clear interest in finding out more about local STI and unplanned pregnancy rates among their peers. This curiosity was not driven solely by fear or worry, but by a genuine desire for informed, practical understanding of sexual health realities. As Jenna simply stated: "we need facts." When I asked participants what difference having factual information, such as local STI and unplanned pregnancy rates, would make to them, Angharad responded: "it will help us understand how bad the problem is, because right now we are just told about how risky having sex is." Jenna added, "yeah, we can make our own mind up then, because they (teachers) could be telling us this to stop us having sex."

This questioning of risk-focused SRE extended beyond statistics and local prevalence rates to more fundamental confusion about the messages young people were receiving. Rhodri, for example, challenged the internal logic of SRE narratives that framed sex primarily as harmful, asking: "If having sex is so bad, why do people do it? I'm confused, like" (Rhodri: School A-G2.TV). Several members of the group nodded or laughed in agreement, signaling that this sense of confusion was shared rather than individual. Rhodri's comment reflects a critical awareness of the gap between adult-led, risk-based SRE messaging and young people's understanding of sex as a normal and relational aspect of life.

This reinforces participants' calls for clearer and more honest conversations that acknowledge both risk and lived experience (Allen 2011).

This desire for factual, localised information reflects a broader call for transparency in SRE, where young people are not just passive recipients of risk-based messages but active learners seeking to make informed decisions (Castleton et al. 2024; Advocates for Youth 2025). Participants' questions and reflections highlight the importance of trust, relevance, and honesty in SRE.

Furthermore, many participants in each of the groups were keen to have a professional visit their schools to talk with them and answer their questions. Some even asked if I could arrange for a member of the RADS team to come and address their concerns as soon as possible. They also expressed interest in receiving information from RADS advisors about what they described as "other things about sex," "the good things about sex," and, as one participant put it, "you know, the nice things about sex" (Darcy: School A-G2.TV). These responses highlight a gap in current SRE provision in NPT, revealing a desire for more balanced, honest, and developmentally relevant conversations that reflect the full spectrum of sexual health and relationships. Rather than turning to professionals by default, participants' requests suggest an active search for trusted, knowledgeable adults who could provide credible information that they felt was absent from school-based SRE. This aligns with research showing that when formal SRE fails to meet young people's needs, they seek practical and locally relevant information and actively request direct engagement with professionals to fill these gaps (Allen 2005b; Patterson et al. 2019; Waling et al. 2020).

5.2.6 Understanding consent, communication, and emotional intimacy in relationships

Many participants expressed a strong desire to better understand consent and how to communicate effectively with partners about sex. Throughout the group interviews, participants raised a range of questions that reflected varying levels of concern and confusion around the concept of consent contributing to their limited understanding of sexual wellbeing:

Lilly: How to talk to your boyfriend about consent. (School A-G1.TV)

Charlie: Do we need consent to kiss someone? (School C-G5.TV)

James: What if you change your mind in the middle of having sex, what should you do? (School B-G4.TV)

Jo: Can you give consent if you're drunk? (School B-G3.TV)

These questions highlight a clear need for more comprehensive and practical education around consent and not just as a legal or ethical concept, but as a lived experience that involves communication, boundaries, and respect. Some girls expressed a desire to understand “how to say no when feeling pressured to have sex by a partner” (Angharad: School A-G2.TV). Her concern, echoed by others, highlights the importance of equipping young people with the language, confidence, and practical strategies to navigate complex interpersonal situations and assert their boundaries.

Fortunately, I had the time to discuss and answer participants' questions, which helped to reassure them and support their understanding. Participants' curiosity and concern suggests that current SRE provision may not be adequately addressing the nuances of consent, especially in real-life contexts. There is a clear opportunity to strengthen SRE by including more interactive, scenario-based learning that helps young people understand how to give, withdraw, and respect consent and how to communicate openly and safely in relationships.

In all groups, some participants expressed concerns about how to talk to their boyfriends about using condoms. Kate (School B-G4.TV) asked, “what if your boyfriend won't wear one, what should we say?” Kate's group, which was mostly girls, discussed at length the peer pressure they felt from boys to have sex without a condom. This reflects what Holland et al. (1998) termed the “male-in-the-head”, the internalised expectation of male sexual entitlement that shapes how young women negotiate safety. Although first conceptualised in the 1990s, recent empirical studies show that similar gendered pressures persist, with

young women experiencing anxiety, power imbalances, and fear of rejection when negotiating condom use (Wetzel et al. 2024).

CJ (School B-G4.TV) wanted to know “how to talk to your partner about your feelings about being intimate,” explaining that they felt anxious and frightened about expressing these feelings. This prompted several group members to ask, “What does intimacy mean?” highlighting that the concept was unclear for some participants. Through discussion, the group recognised that intimacy is not only about sexual contact but also involves emotional closeness, trust, communication, and feeling safe and respected within a relationship. This desire for clarity mirrors wider evidence showing that young people continue to experience uncertainty and discomfort when trying to communicate about boundaries, emotional needs, or condom use in relationships (Alam and Alldred 2021; Abbott et al. 2021).

Several participants also noted that although they were not currently sexually active, they wanted this information to help them prepare for future relationships or, as some put it, “when we decide to have sex.” Many felt that open discussion in SRE lessons would support them to make informed and confident decisions. These insights suggest that young people are not only seeking clarity about consent but also looking for guidance on how to build healthy and respectful relationships, an area they felt current provision does not address.

Negotiating safe sex and consent is fundamental to enabling young people to feel safe and respected and forms a key component of pleasure-positive sexuality education. Empirical research shows that when SRE includes practical guidance on communication, consent, and condom negotiation, young people feel more confident and better equipped to make informed choices. For example, Holland et al. (1998) found that young women often faced pressure or unequal power dynamics when trying to negotiate condom use, while Allen’s (2011) classroom research shows that learners want concrete, realistic strategies for expressing boundaries. Marston and King (2006) similarly identify embarrassment, stigma, and gendered expectations as persistent barriers to sexual communication. Together, these studies illustrate how practical, relational, and context-specific learning strengthens young people’s confidence and safety in their relationships.

5.2.7 Positive experiences of practical, youth-friendly and risk-focused SRE

While much of the chapter has explored the emotional impact of risk-focused SRE, participants also described a range of positive and confidence-building experiences, particularly when risk-based content was facilitated in practical, open, and youth-friendly ways. Recognising these perspectives adds nuance to the findings and shows that risk-focused SRE was not inherently negative; rather, its impact depended on how it was facilitated. When risk-based SRE felt practical, supportive, and relevant, young people often described it as helpful, enjoyable, and empowering. Participants' positive accounts of these sessions highlight how open, non-judgmental facilitation contributed to increased psychological safety, enabling young people to ask questions, engage more confidently, and move beyond fear-based understandings of risk.

Participants across all groups highlighted the value of being able to access and discuss information about what they perceived as risks, particularly STIs and pregnancy, within their school and community settings. This content was viewed as important not only for personal awareness but also for understanding how to protect themselves and others. Practical demonstrations were especially praised for reducing confusion and anxiety. A group comprising mainly boys discussed the physical risks of sexual activity, particularly the potential for contracting STIs if condoms were not used. They demonstrated strong awareness of where to access condoms and sexual health advice, citing the RADS service available at their local youth clubs.

They spoke positively about the sexual health education they received from RADS staff, including practical condom demonstrations to “stop us catching STIs” (Owen: School B-G3.TV) and “getting girls pregnant” (Ed: School B-G3.TV). Owen explained that learning how to use condoms properly made him feel more prepared because it was about “knowing what to do, not just being told it’s risky.” Ed similarly described these sessions as useful because they showed them “how to stop catching STIs and getting girls pregnant,” rather than simply warning them about consequences. For these participants, hands-on, practical guidance

replaced fear with readiness, especially as the sessions allowed them to ask questions openly: “you can ask questions, and they actually explain it properly” (School B-G3.TV).

Many participants across all three schools described similar experiences of sexual health education facilitated by RADS and school nurse teams. Several demonstrated strong knowledge of STI transmission, contraception, and the importance of prevention. Annabelle, for example, explained that young people needed “the information about how to use condoms and prevent STIs and pregnancy, before we have sex,” a view shared widely in her group. Participants also valued having access to RADS “to get condoms” (Rhydian: School B-G1.TV), “help with the pill” (Lilly: School B-G1.TV), “to protect ourselves when we are ready to have sex” (Rhys: School B-G1.TV). RADS was also described as helping young people understand safe relationships and consent, supporting them to “understand our rights” (Stacey: School B-G3.TV) and “know what bad relationships look like” (Annabelle: School B-G3.TV).

Alongside these accounts, participants also reflected on the broader positive aspects of SRE. During the workshops, many used heart-shaped cards to record memorable, enjoyable, or informative lessons. Jo described SRE as something that “preps me for my life ahead,” delivered by a teacher who was “funny, cool.” Others echoed similar views:

Charlie: Teacher made the lessons fun and interesting while making them memorable. (School C-G5.PTW)

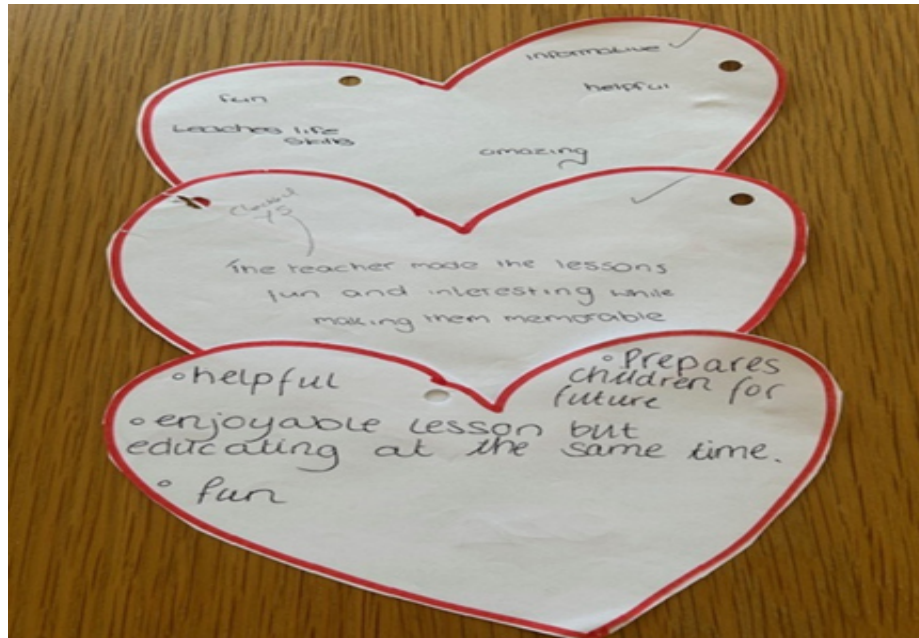
Cerys: Fun, helpful, amazing, informative, teaches life skills. (School C-G5. PTW)

Ben: Helpful, enjoyable lessons but educating at the same time. Prepares children for the future. Fun. (School B-G4.PTW)

All the above reflections were also acknowledged visually on their cut-out heart cards during the workshop activity (Figure 2). The activity itself prompted rich discussion within each group. Jo, for example, was consistent throughout the fieldwork in sharing her largely positive experience of SRE. She was particularly

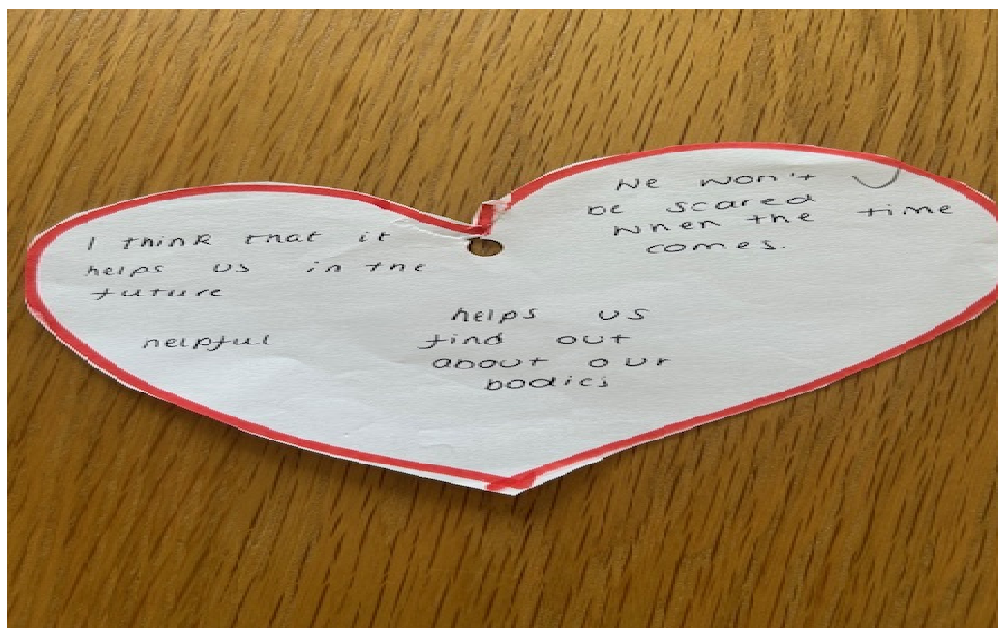
pragmatic and confident in her views, often standing her ground during group discussions when others disagreed with her reflections, such as describing SRE as “awesome.” A term she later explained meant that the lessons were helpful, educational, enjoyable, fun, and prepared us for the future (Figure 3, second heart).

Figure 2: Workshop/Station Five: Examples of participants’ positive reflections of SRE on their cut-out heart cards.



Participants in other schools shared similar reflections. One participant described SRE as something that: helps us find out about our bodies, we won't be scared when the time comes (Angharad: School A-G2.PTW), shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Workshop/Station Five: Angharad's positive view on SRE



Several participants said that they particularly enjoyed SRE when it was delivered by external professionals such as youth workers or school nurses. These educators were often described as confident, open, and able to answer questions without judgement:

Rhodri: the woman from the youth service we had we call her the condom lady... she was so confident like a human Google... had such funny games ... we weren't stuck in our seats for the whole lesson either and none of the boys played up like they do in the class with miss. (School A-G2.TV)

Jay: The nurse was brilliant, and she had loads of fun games and quizzes I liked that lesson... she knew everything about STI's ... she said we could ask her anything. (School B-G3.TV)

Research supports these accounts, demonstrating that while SRE can be inconsistent and risk focused, many young people still report positive experiences, especially when the delivery is engaging, inclusive, and responsive to their needs. Recent research (Renold et al. 2023b, 2023c) found that although young people's experiences of SRE were mixed, many still preferred receiving it in school. Young people valued structured SRE delivered by adults who were confident, caring, and comfortable discussing sensitive topics. When delivered creatively and with openness, SRE was described by participants as a positive and empowering experience (Renold et al. 2023). Together, these accounts

highlight that risk-focused SRE was experienced positively when it centred on practical guidance, openness, and youth-friendly facilitation. Rather than generating fear, these approaches supported young people to feel informed, confident, and prepared. Their reflections suggest that the value of risk-based content lies not in its warnings, but in how it is made accessible, relevant, and responsive to their needs, reinforcing the importance of SRE that prioritises clarity, dialogue, and meaningful support.

5.3 Silencing pleasure: The consequence of exclusion

The concept of “pleasurable risk” offers a useful lens here, recognising that sexual exploration inevitably involves uncertainty but can also contribute to young people’s agency, confidence, and wellbeing when grounded in consent, communication, and safety (Van Ditzhuijzen and Overeem 2025). This perspective challenges dominant risk-avoidance models and highlights what is lost when SRE excludes discussions of pleasure, desire, and positive sexual experiences (Hirst 2013; Allen 2012). Young people’s accounts illustrate precisely how this absence of pleasure-focused content limits their ability to navigate sexual exploration safely and confidently. During all group interviews, when discussing how SRE could be improved, many participants shared their frustration about how lessons were heavily focused on risk, repeatedly asking me, “why do we only get information on the dangers of sex?”, “why are we always told sex is bad for us?”, and “why do adults make us feel it’s wrong to have sex?” (FN).

Nieve: why don’t they tell us about the good things about sex in our SRE lessons? (School B-G4.TV)

Echoing Nieve’s question above, several groups went beyond simply asking why pleasure was absent and began exploring what they understood the “benefits” of sex to be when it is consensual. Their reflections linked sex not only to physical enjoyment but also to emotional wellbeing, intimacy, love, and connection. For example, participants described sex as “exciting,” “fun,” and “a way of being close to someone,” while others associated it with trust and being in a loving relationship (FN). These interpretations highlight that young people already hold

relational and emotional understandings of sex, which are overlooked when SRE focuses solely on danger and prevention.

Many participants in all three schools displayed signs of exasperation when talking about their SRE lessons being predominantly risk-focused. This was conveyed both verbally and nonverbally, through sarcasm, tone, eye-rolling, and head shaking. Comments such as: oh, that's exactly what we need in it (Phoebe: School A-G2.TV) and let's tell them all the bad things that will put them off like (Stacey: School B-G3.TV) emphasised a shared sense of boredom and disconnect between SRE content and their lived experiences and questions about sex and relationships.

The quotations from Nieve above and Ed's comment that opened this chapter: "Why does everyone tell us about all the bad things about having sex, but nobody tells us anything good about sex?" (School B-G3.TV), capture this frustration. Although boys and girls expressed these concerns in slightly different ways, boys tended to emphasise the lack of practical and balanced information, questioning why lessons focused on danger without explaining what sex actually involves, while many girls highlighted the absence of talk about feelings, relationships, and navigating intimacy safely. CJ, the non-binary participant, drew attention to how heteronormativity combined with risk-focused messaging made SRE feel "not for us" or as though it was "talking about people who aren't me". These concerns reflect a wider questioning among young people, who were critical of SRE's focus on risk and expressed a clear desire for education that includes emotional, relational, and pleasurable aspects of sex.

The absence of discussion about pleasure for participants was experienced not simply as missing content but as a form of silencing. Silence, in this context, operated as an active boundary, marking what could be spoken about in SRE and what was considered off-limits. This silence did not feel neutral. Young people interpreted it as adults deliberately withholding information about the positive, relational, and pleasurable aspects of sex, shaping their understanding of sex as something inherently dangerous or morally suspect. In this sense, the silence around pleasure communicated a message in itself, reinforcing the idea that some

knowledge is permitted while other knowledge, particularly knowledge linked to desire, autonomy, and positive sexuality, is suppressed. Feeling “kept in the dark” contributed to participants’ frustration and deepened the mistrust they felt towards SRE.

This emphasis on exclusion stands in stark contrast with the WHO’s definition of sexual health, which includes the right to pleasurable and safe sexual experiences (WHO 2022), and UNESCO’s call for comprehensive sexuality education that supports emotional development and respectful relationships (UNESCO 2024). Importantly, the Welsh RSE Code (Welsh Government 2022a) explicitly frames sexual health as including wellbeing, relationships, and pleasure, positioning pleasure as a legitimate part of learning about sexuality. In contrast, the statutory RSE guidance in England (DfE 2025) does not reference pleasure at all, instead emphasising safeguarding, risks, and the prevention of harm. This policy divergence is significant: young people in this study identified pleasure as the very area that is silenced in their SRE. This means their experiences align more closely with the aspirations of Welsh policy than with the more limited scope of the English guidance.

This call for pleasure-inclusive, affirming, and relational RSE is strongly supported by wider research, which consistently shows that young people want education that acknowledges desire, intimacy, agency, and positive sexual experiences rather than framing sex solely as danger or risk (McGeeney and Kehily 2016a). Young people’s experiences of pleasure-silencing are not unique to this study; they are well-documented in academic literature examining how desire and pleasure are marginalised or avoided in sexuality education (McGeeney 2014; King-Hill 2021). Addressing this silence is therefore essential for developing meaningful, youth-centred RSE that reflects young people’s lived realities (McGeeney and Kehily 2016; Ford et al. 2021; Setty and Hunt 2025; King-Hill 2024b)

5.3.1 Creating safe spaces for sensitive topics

Throughout both the workshops and interviews, it became clear that comfort levels varied significantly when discussing sexual pleasure. While many participants were keen to explore and critique its absence in SRE, others appeared visibly uncomfortable or embarrassed when the topic was raised. Physical and verbal signs of discomfort included blushing, avoiding eye contact, looking down, nervous laughter, and covering their faces. These behavioural and verbal responses suggest varying levels of psychological safety within the group, with some participants managing discomfort through humour or avoidance while others withdrew from discussion altogether. This indicates that engagement with sensitive topics such as sexual pleasure is shaped not only by individual confidence but by how safe participants feel within the peer group context. Some participants during the interviews exclaimed:

Sadie: Oh my god, this is sick like. (School B-G4.FWN)

Beth: I'm so embarrassed. (School C-G5.FWN)

These reactions often prompted laughter from peers, suggesting that for some, the topic felt too personal or taboo. This was particularly evident in School C, where during the interviews, one participant, Charlie, appeared nervous and kept looking out of the window and then raised his voice to say: "I don't want to talk about that" (School C-G5.FN), effectively shutting down the conversation. His peers, both female (Cerys and Beth), remained silent initially but later acknowledged the value of discussing pleasure in their SRE with me. While Charlie sat quietly during the discussion on pleasure in SRE, Cerys observed: "some of my friends are already going on the internet to find the information out anyway." The term "information," Cerys explained was relating to the enjoyment of sex. She further discussed how her friends can "find all these things out over the internet" (School C-G5.FN). Beth also contributed by adding that "some of our friends are accessing porn online, so it would be better to have discussion on the enjoyments and nice things about sex in our SRE lessons," because, as she stated: "it would be safer and more reliable" (School C-G5.FN).

As an SRE educator, and researcher, fieldwork highlighted the importance of creating safe, inclusive spaces where all young people feel respected and supported in engaging with sensitive topics. I was reassured that participants felt able to opt out of discussions and that the co-created agreements established at the start of each session helped foster emotional safety (UNESCO 2023). By normalising feelings of discomfort and reinforcing participants' agency throughout, I was able to create a trusting environment that encouraged openness while respecting boundaries. This approach is supported by Round's (2024) concept of "cultures of conversation", which advocates for emotionally attuned pedagogies that move beyond risk-focused messaging and instead foster reflective, dialogic spaces. Such spaces allow educators and learners to navigate discomfort constructively, and enable greater engagement with difficult topics like pleasure, consent, and emotional intimacy (Round 2024).

Van Ditzhuijzen and Overeem's (2025) scoping review further supports this, showing that pleasure-inclusive SRE enhances sexual wellbeing and autonomy, particularly when delivered in environments that prioritise emotional safety and inclusivity. Their review highlights how young people benefit from learning about intimacy in ways that affirm their agency and support their evolving identities. Moreover, Meyer (2003) emphasises that effective sex education must go beyond information delivery to include life skills such as communication, empathy, and decision-making. These dimensions are critical to creating emotionally safe learning environments where young people feel empowered to ask questions, express uncertainty, and explore sensitive topics without fear of judgement (Meyer 2003; UNESECO 2023). Together, these studies support the findings from this research and reinforce the need for SRE to be delivered in ways that are emotionally attuned, flexible, and responsive to the diverse comfort levels of young people. This will ensure that all aspects of sex and relationships, including 'pleasure', can be explored in a safe meaningful way, respecting individual boundaries and lived experiences (UNESCO 2023; Round 2024; Van Ditzhuijzen and Overeem 2025).

5.4 Reimagining Affirmative SRE: Participants' visions for change

Participants across all three schools frequently suggested ways to enhance their SRE to ensure a more balanced and comprehensive curriculum, one that moves beyond risk-focused approaches and includes the context of pleasure. Their recommendations fell into two clear areas: (1) improvements to the content, and (2) improvements to the pedagogical approaches used to teach SRE.

5.4.1 Improvements to SRE content

Across all three schools, participants emphasised that the content of their SRE remained dominated by risks, pregnancy, STIs, and “dangerous relationships”. While they recognised the value of this information, many felt it created an overly negative and limited picture of sex. As one participant noted, “we know we have to be told about STIs to stop us getting STIs” (James: School B-G4.FN), and another added, “to stop us getting pregnant” (Beth: School A-G5.FN). Yet these understandings sat alongside a strong desire for content that reflected the positive, relational, and emotional dimensions of sexuality.

Participants wanted SRE to include pleasure, desire, enjoyment, intimacy, and emotional connection, positioned as normal aspects of growing up rather than taboo subjects. This included explicitly recognising the experiences of LGBTQ+ young people. One participant captured this clearly, stating, “teachers need to talk to us about trans people because we should be able to enjoy sex too” (Zen: School A-G2.TV). These perspectives align with research demonstrating that pleasure-inclusive SRE strengthens sexual agency, emotional wellbeing, and relational health by making content more reflective of young people’s lived realities (Van Ditzhuijzen and Overeem 2025; Mark et al. 2021).

Participants also expressed frustration that SRE rarely addressed the questions they genuinely had about navigating relationships, feelings, and communication. Rather than isolated knowledge gaps, these questions revealed a broader desire for education that acknowledged the emotional complexity of adolescent relationships. Participants wanted clarity on issues such as understanding feelings of love, communicating about sex and consent, and managing the beginnings and endings of relationships. These concerns indicate that current SRE is perceived as disconnected from the realities of their everyday lives.

These gaps mirror wider critiques in the literature, where researchers argue that SRE, which ignores pleasure, emotional connection, and relational dynamics risks reinforcing shame and limiting young people's capacity to make informed, confident choices (Goldfarb and Lieberman 2021). Evidence also suggests that normalising conversations about pleasure and emotions can build body confidence and encourage more open communication with partners (Ingham 2005), both of which were echoed in participants' accounts. Collectively, their narratives point towards a shared vision for SRE content that is more balanced than the current risk-dominated approach, more honest and inclusive in acknowledging diverse identities and experiences, emotionally informed in recognising love, attraction, and communication as central, and positive and shame-reducing, framing sexuality as a normal and healthy part of development rather than something to be feared or avoided.

For the participants in this study, improving SRE content required more than adding new topics: it demanded a shift towards teaching that acknowledges pleasure, emotions, and relationships as integral to healthy sexual development. This reframing reflects both their lived experiences and a strong evidence base calling for SRE that supports empowerment, agency, and wellbeing.

5.4.2 Improvements to SRE provision

Alongside changes to SRE content, young people were clear that the pedagogical environment strongly shaped whether SRE felt safe, relevant, and engaging. Across all schools, participants called for approaches that centred their experiences and reduced the embarrassment often associated with SRE. This reflects wider evidence that participatory, dialogic pedagogies support emotional safety and agency in RSE (Goldfarb and Lieberman 2021; UNESCO, 2023). A recurring theme was the need for shared ownership of SRE. Participants described wanting to help shape class expectations so that lessons felt predictable and respectful. As one participant explained, "If we decide the rules first, everyone knows what to expect" (Cerys: School C-G5.TV). This aligns with

UNESCO's (2023) emphasis on co-created group agreements as a foundation for safe and equitable classroom climates.

Participants also expressed a preference for interactive, learner-centred methods, rather than being “talked at”. They recommended anonymous question tools, small-group discussions, peer-led tasks, scenario-based learning, and creative activities. Evidence suggests that such participatory, pupil-centred strategies not only reduce shame but also promote deeper engagement with sensitive topics and foster critical thinking (Camarota and Fine, 2010; Renold et al. 2024). One participant illustrated this clearly: “If we used made-up stories, like the soaps, we wouldn’t get embarrassed talking about things” (Jenna: School B-G4.TV).

Flexibility was equally important. Several participants spoke about the need to engage “at our own pace” or step back when topics felt overwhelming. This echoes Renold et al.’s (2024) call for emotionally responsive pedagogies that allow young people to regulate their participation in ways that support wellbeing and agency. Overall, participants envisioned SRE pedagogy that is collaborative, adaptable, and emotionally attuned. Importantly, their preferences for shared ownership, interactivity, and flexibility highlight a desire for teaching approaches that mirror the relational, respectful, and empowering principles they also valued in SRE content. Their views reinforce a growing body of research that positions co-production, shared power, and youth-led approaches as central to effective, rights-based RSE. For participants in this study, improving SRE is therefore not only about what is taught but ensuring the teaching approach creates conditions for openness, trust, and meaningful participation.

5.4.3 Staff training to support pleasure-inclusive SRE

Throughout both workshops and interviews participants expressed the need for approachable SRE educators and emphasised the need for staff to be confident, competent, and comfortable discussing pleasure in a respectful, LGBTQ+ inclusive and sensitive way. Many participants used narratives such as: “we want teachers to know what they’re talking about (Lilly: School A-G1.TV), not be embarrassed when their talking to us in SRE lessons about the good things about

sex” (Rhodri: School B-G2.TV), “make sure lessons are for everyone including LGBTQ+ young people” (CJ: School B-G4.TV) and “teachers need to be educated in SRE so they can give us what we need and not just talk about the bad things like STIs and pregnancy” (Cerys: School C-G5.TV).

These insights align with recent literature highlighting the importance of staff training in delivering pleasure-inclusive SRE, particularly in response to young people's calls for more confident and competent educators. For instance, Wood et al. (2019) emphasise that integrating discussions of sexual pleasure into SRE requires educators to approach the topic with nuance and sensitivity. Mark et al. (2021) argue that excluding pleasure from SRE can hinder young people's sexual development and wellbeing, calling for training that addresses pleasure alongside consent and relationships. Similarly, Hirst (2008) highlights the gap between adult-led approaches and young people's lived experiences, advocating for training that Centre's on youth perspectives. Together, these studies stress the need for professional development to support pleasure-informed SRE.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has shown how risk-focused SRE, centred on pregnancy, STIs, and danger, shaped participants' understandings of sex and relationships as predominantly negative, often leaving them confused, frustrated, and disengaged. These findings align with longstanding critiques of risk and moral panic driven SRE (Fine 1988; Pound et al. 2016; Ford et al. 2021). Participants expressed a clear desire for more balanced, inclusive, and emotionally relevant SRE that reflects their lived experiences and supports their sexual agency. Their insights echo concerns that fear based messaging perpetuates shame and deters engagement (Irvine 2009; Cense and Ganzevoort 2018; Setty and Hunt 2025), while reinforcing calls for pleasure-inclusive approaches that promote empowerment and relational wellbeing (Hirst 2013; Mark et al. 2021; Van Ditzhuijzen and Overeem 2025). By foregrounding young people's perspectives, this chapter contributes to growing evidence in support of holistic, youth-centred SRE and highlights the emotional impact of current provision.

These insights are particularly relevant in Wales, where the new RSE Code seeks to move beyond narrow, risk-led approaches. The findings illustrate why the Curriculum for Wales positions risk within a broader rights-based understanding of relationships and wellbeing, rather than as the central organising principle of RSE. They also demonstrate how risk-focused, heteronormative SRE further marginalises trans and non-binary young people by rendering their identities, bodies, and relationships invisible. Their experiences underscore the urgent need for inclusive, identity-affirming RSE that reflects the diversity of young people's realities and aligns with the Welsh RSE Code's commitment to equality and belonging. These findings also highlight tensions between young people's voice and agency, where opportunities to question and reflect on SRE did not always translate into meaningful influence over provision. These experiences were shaped by power relations and varying levels of psychological safety, which influenced how young people engaged with and interpreted risk-focused messaging.

Chapter Six

“That’s not inclusive, is it? Talk to us about LGBTQ+ people”: LGBTQ+-Inclusive SRE

6.1 Introduction

Daf: how do we know what a safe LGBTQ+ relationship looks like if we don't talk about it in our lessons? (School B-G3.TV)

Drawing on workshop and interview data, this chapter examines how the absence of LGBTQ+ inclusion shapes young people's experiences, emotions, and access to support. Participants described feeling unrepresented and unsupported, often noting teacher discomfort, limited expertise, and a reliance on external facilitators, with many turning to online sources for basic information about LGBTQ+ identities and relationships, sometimes encountering unsafe or inaccurate material. Before analysing these issues, the chapter outlines how participants conceptualised LGBTQ+-inclusive SRE and then explores three interconnected areas:

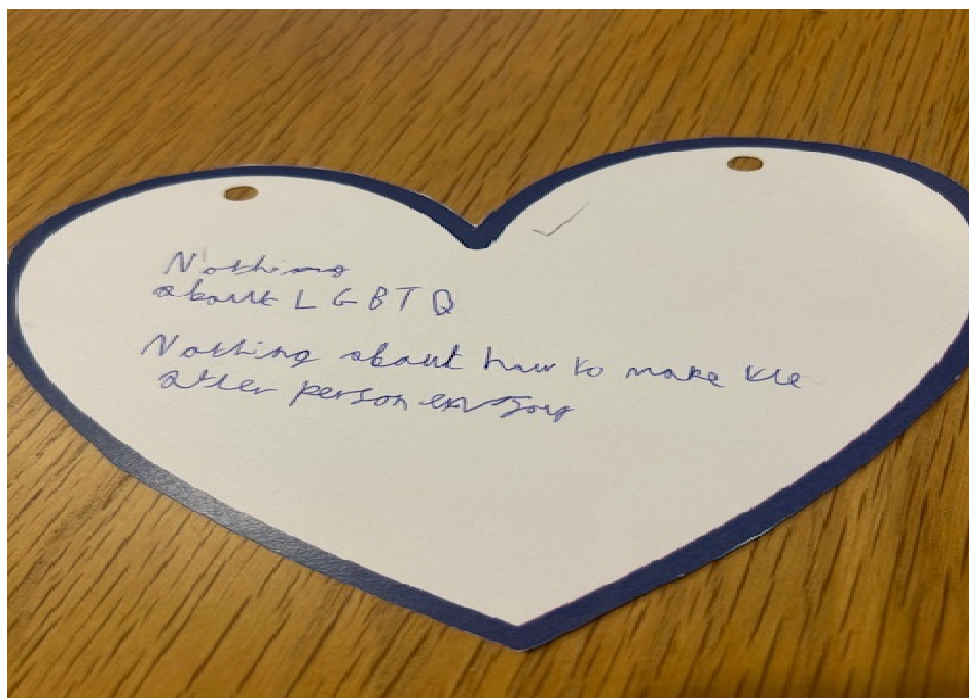
normalising LGBTQ+ content across the curriculum through representation and visibility; introducing LGBTQ+-inclusive SRE earlier to foster understanding and reduce stigma; and participants' recommendations for improving LGBTQ+ inclusion, including trained external facilitators, co-production, and everyday inclusive practices, while also examining how these experiences are shaped through group interaction, power relations, and varying levels of psychological safety within the research setting.

6.2 Defining LGBTQ+ Inclusive SRE: Participants' perspectives

To contextualise the themes outlined above, this section examines how participants conceptualised LGBTQ+-inclusive SRE. Their interpretations echo wider debates, where LGBTQ+-inclusivity is seen as essential yet contested. While much literature emphasises visibility and representation for LGBTQ+ young people (e.g. UNESCO 2018; Formby and Donovan 2020), critical scholars argue that “inclusion” can be tokenistic if it simply adds LGBTQ+ content without challenging heteronormative norms (Renold 2005). Participants initially described their SRE through a strong sense of absence, particularly the lack of LGBTQ+ representation. Several explicitly labelled this as “not inclusive,” and their definitions emerged through identifying what was missing, reflecting critiques that LGBTQ+ inclusion is often framed by omission rather than meaningful pedagogical change.

These understandings became especially clear during the workshops. When asked to identify negative aspects of their SRE, a recurring response was “nothing about LGBTQ” (Rhys: School A-G1.PWT) (Figure 4). This aligns with research showing how silence and avoidance function as forms of exclusion that signal LGBTQ+ identities as outside the ‘normal’ curriculum (Ferfolja and Ullman, 2020). Participants' reflections therefore highlight both unmet learning needs and the wider emotional and social consequences of exclusion.

Figure 4: Workshop/Station Five: Example of a participant's negative view of SRE



Although initially framed as an absence rather than LGBTQ+ inclusivity, participants' responses highlighted a perceived gap in representation that became central to later discussions of what LGBTQ+ inclusive SRE should entail. When asked how this made them feel, some participants engaged in more explicit conversations about visibility and inclusion in SRE:

Rhys: That's not inclusive, is it? (School A-G1.TV)

Researcher: What is your understanding of the term inclusive?

Rhys: We should have talks on LGBT people, you know, include them in our SRE lessons, but we don't. (School A-G1.TV)

This exchange marked a shift in the discussion, as participants began to explicitly associate LGBTQ+-inclusivity with the presence of LGBTQ+ content and the recognition of diverse identities within the curriculum. Similar discussions occurred across all groups, with participants expressing that LGBTQ+-inclusive SRE should reflect all young people's realities and identities and be embedded

across their SRE lessons. While participants' definitions of LGBTQ+-inclusivity varied, several common themes emerged, particularly around visibility, safety, and representation. These dimensions were central to how young people understood LGBTQ+ inclusion, with many describing inclusion as the feeling of being seen, heard, and valued within SRE. Others emphasised the importance of having their identities, experiences, and relationships reflected in the curriculum. For many, LGBTQ+-inclusivity also meant being able to learn without fear, judgement, or discrimination, and having access to safe spaces where they could express themselves freely:

CJ: Being able to use my pronoun. (School B-G4.TV)

These accounts highlight that participants understood LGBTQ+-inclusivity not only in terms of representation, but also through everyday practices that signal recognition, respect, and safety within SRE lessons. This aligns with research emphasising that LGBTQ+-inclusive SRE must ensure visibility, representation, and emotional safety for young people (Formby and Donovan 2020; Ullman and Ferfolja 2020). Within NPT, LGBTQ+-inclusive SRE is supported through a local professional group and associated training that promotes reflection on language, attitudes, and practice. However, participants' accounts suggest that this training is not consistently filtering into classroom practice.

Quinlivan (2019) further frames LGBTQ+ inclusion as a legal and rights-based requirement grounded in international human rights law but cautions that LGBTQ+ inclusion often fails in practice when structural conditions remain unchanged. Effective LGBTQ+-inclusion therefore requires more than symbolic gestures and must involve meaningful policy and pedagogical reform. Meaningful LGBTQ+-inclusion requires substantive structural change, including anti-discrimination measures, individualised support, and genuinely LGBTQ+-inclusive policies within mainstream education settings, rather than symbolic or tokenistic gestures (Quinlivan 2019).

Building on this framing, participants' accounts suggest that LGBTQ+ inclusion is asserted in principle but inconsistently realised in practice. Their experiences

indicate that LGBTQ+ inclusive SRE extends beyond adding LGBTQ+ content to the curriculum; it involves creating learning environments where young people feel recognised, respected, and safe. The absence of LGBTQ+ representation, language, and discussion therefore operates as a form of LGBTQ+ exclusion that shapes their sense of belonging and how they experience SRE provision.

6.3 Normalising LGBTQ+ inclusive SRE across the curriculum

This section focuses on the idea of normalisation and explores how participants wanted LGBTQ+ identities to be treated as a standard and expected part of SRE. Early discussions in the workshops made it clear that meeting the SRE needs of LGBTQ+ young people, and supporting their peers to understand these needs, was a significant concern for most participants. This section examines how LGBTQ+ identities and relationships were described as something that should be included in the everyday delivery of SRE, shaping participants' expectations of what inclusive and relevant provision should look like across the curriculum.

For example, the group workshops began with the prompt, what does the term SRE mean? While participants offered varied interpretations of SRE, recorded on flipchart paper (Figure 1), many also raised the topic of LGBTQ+ inclusion during their workshop discussions:

Lilly: I put LGBTQ down because I think we should be taught about it in school and definitely in SRE...we got LGBT people in our school including teachers (some participants laugh). (School A-G1.TV)

Tom: Well, let's change SRE for two people then (laughter, from a few young people sitting next to Tom). (School A-G1.TV)

Lilly: That's why we need it (LGBTQ) cos of people like him (she points to Tom) then people like me...wouldn't have to be bullied (participants go quiet). (School A-G1.TV)

This exchange reflects the emotional impact and sense of urgency participants attached to LGBTQ+ inclusion in SRE. It also highlights how peer attitudes and school culture can shape perceptions of safety and belonging. Lilly's mention of bullying gave the discussion a personal and powerful element. The tension

between Lilly and Tom stemmed from conflicting views on LGBTQ+ inclusion in SRE. Lilly's comment reflected a genuine concern for representation, while Tom responds with a dismissive joke about changing SRE for two people, revealed a lack of understanding on his part. The exchange shifted the atmosphere in the room. It prompted reflection and opening up deeper discussion within their group about their agreement of being respectful to each other, which was established within their group contract prior to commencing the fieldwork. Sensing this shift, I invited participants to continue to share their thoughts on LGBTQ+ content in SRE. All responded positively and passionately, including Tom, who apologised to Lilly, explaining his statement was meant as a joke, which Lilly verbally accepted. This interaction illustrates why participants consistently emphasised the need to normalise LGBTQ+ content across the curriculum, as the tension between Lilly and Tom emerged precisely because LGBTQ+ identities were treated as exceptional rather than an ordinary, expected part of SRE.

I wondered whether Tom's apology stemmed from genuine reflection or if he felt pressured after being confronted. This exchange echoes concerns raised in UK policy and inspection evidence (Ofsted 2013; Terrence Higgins Trust 2016) about how peer dynamics and school climate shape young people's engagement with SRE. From a reflexive standpoint, I noted that as the session continued, and across subsequent workshops, Tom's participation appeared to shift, with his contributions becoming more cautious and more responsive to the views of others. Rather than indicating a definitive learning outcome, this observation draws attention to how peer-led challenge within facilitated group discussions can influence how young people position themselves and negotiate sensitive topics (Finlay and Gough 2003; Braun and Clarke 2021). This shift also reflects changing levels of psychological safety within the group, as participants negotiated expressing views on a sensitive topic in the presence of peers.

Across all the workshops, similar conversations revealed a shared belief that inclusive SRE must reflect the lived realities of LGBTQ+ young people. With many participants expressing a strong desire for an LGBTQ+ inclusive approach to SRE in their educational settings. It became clear that participants also understood

LGBTQ+ inclusivity to mean learning about sex, gender, and sexuality in ways that promote understanding of diverse relationships:

Zen: Inclusivity to me means not having to explain who I am every time we talk about relationships; it should already be part of the lesson. (School A-G2.TV)

This reflects what the literature describes as the normalisation of LGBTQ+ identities, where diversity is embedded in everyday SRE rather than treated as an exception. Across all three schools, participants also expressed that LGBTQ+ inclusive SRE must include meaningful learning about the full range of gender identities and sexualities. Zen expanded on this in a separate group discussion, stating: “we want to learn about all kinds of different genders and sexualities, how relationships work for everyone, not just straight people” (School A-G1.TV).

While not all participants viewed their current SRE curriculum as problematic in terms of inclusivity, most recognised the need for a more LGBTQ+ inclusive approach to ensure that the needs of all their peers, including those who are LGBTQ+, were acknowledged and addressed. All discussions highlighted a strong interest in learning about LGBTQ+ relationships, with participants keen to explore a wide range of topics. These included understanding different sexual orientations and gender identities, recognising what healthy LGBTQ+ relationships look like, learning about inclusive sexual health practices, and appreciating the importance of visibility and representation to enable participants to feel informed, accepted, and safe:

Lilly: Look...we all know someone who is LGBTQ+...or whatever ... and its ok... right...so there is no big deal...for most of us anyway...so let's just get on with it ...make sure...you know like ...we all get information in school to teach us about these things (participants agreed verbally or nod their heads). (School A-G1.TV)

Sam: Yeah, we need to be told about all kinds of relationships and sexuality... and gender stuff...so that we can feel normal...and be who we want to be.... It's no big deal is it...everyone's coming out...loads of celebs... (participants agreed in Sams group verbally or nod their heads). (School A-G1.TV)

Darcy: Anyway ... what does normal mean....isn't it better to teach us about safe relationships ...doesn't matter what kind they are... does it? (School A-G1.TV)

Tom: Ok I get what everyone is saying... and even though I'm not gay...some of the stuff we have been discussing ... in our workshops ... well I might as well be honest like... you know LGBTQ + ... I don't really understand what some of it means. Obviously, I know what most of the letters are... but Q+ I don't know like. So yeah, I would like to know about this stuff. (School A-G1.TV)

These discussions reflect a process of normalisation, whereby LGBTQ+ identities and relationships are constructed by participants as normal, visible, and embedded within everyday social life rather than outside the mainstream. References to LGBTQ+ people as “no big deal” and the emphasis on feeling “normal” indicate a desire for SRE that moves beyond tokenistic inclusion towards an approach that treats diverse sexualities and genders as an expected part of relationships education. However, Tom’s reflection highlights an important tension within this normalisation process. While LGBTQ+ identities are widely accepted, there remains uncertainty and limited understanding of specific terms and experiences, particularly beyond more familiar categories. This suggests that normalisation does not equate to comprehensive knowledge but instead highlights the need for LGBTQ+ inclusive SRE to both affirm diversity and provide clear, accessible content.

The insights shared by Lilly, Sam, Darcy, and Tom reflect a common sentiment within their group, which was echoed across discussions in all three schools. While Tom initially disagreed with Lilly, creating some tension within the group, his later admission that he did not understand the meaning of Q+ and “would like to know about this stuff”, illustrates how peer discussion created space for reflection, learning, and openness.

Across all three schools, most participants expressed a clear understanding of why LGBTQ+ inclusion matters, emphasising not only representation but also the importance of belonging, safety, and relevance. They highlighted the need for SRE to address diverse identities and relationships in ways that help young people feel informed and respected. These views align with UK sector reports showing that LGBTQ+ inclusive SRE fosters belonging, emotional wellbeing, and more relevant learning experiences (Ofsted 2013; Terrence Higgins Trust 2016; Sex Education Forum 2020).

Academic literature reinforces these findings, demonstrating that when LGBTQ+ identities and relationships are integrated as a normal and expected part of SRE, young people are more likely to feel recognised and able to engage meaningfully with learning (Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli 2005; Renold 2013; Formby 2020). Research also stresses the importance of grounding sexuality education in young people's lived realities and recognising them as active social actors (Allen and Rasmussen 2017). More recent evidence shows that comprehensive, LGBTQ+ inclusive approaches play a key role in supporting young people's wellbeing and sense of belonging (Goldfarb and Lieberman 2021).

Despite this, several participants described feeling "invisible" within their SRE lessons due to the persistent focus on heterosexual relationships. When reviewing their lesson packs, young people questioned why teaching centred almost exclusively on male, female relationships, interpreting this omission as a message about which identities were considered legitimate or "normal." As Stacy asked: "why do SRE teachers always talk to us about male and female relationships? Is it because they think we will turn gay or something?" (School A-G1.TV). Sadie similarly wondered whether teachers avoided LGBTQ+ content because "it's not normal" (School B-G4.TV).

These reflections illustrate how curricular silence shaped participants' perceptions of LGBTQ+ identities and contributed to confusion and uncertainty about how to interact respectfully with LGBTQ+ peers. Sadie explained: "I'm always frightened I might say or do the wrong thing when I'm around LGBTQ+ people" (School B-G4.TV). Others were unsure where to seek help, as reflected in the question: "who are we supposed to speak to if we think we are LGBTQ+?" (School A-G2.TV). These accounts show that heteronormativity in SRE not only frustrated participants but also produces confusion, fear of judgement, and a sense of invisibility. Together, these accounts highlight the emotional consequences of a curriculum that fails to normalise LGBTQ+ identities, showing how silence and heteronormativity create shame and confusion for many young people.

These experiences echo wider research demonstrating that when SRE marginalises LGBTQ+ identities, it contributes to emotional distress, internalised stigma, and limited confidence in navigating gender and sexual diversity (Renold 2005; Formby and Donovan 2020; Glazzard and Stones 2022; Fox and Riley 2025). Participants' concerns therefore underline the need for SRE that affirms diverse identities and equips all young people with the knowledge and confidence to engage respectfully with LGBTQ+ topics.

6.3.1 Participants frustration over the lack of LGBTQ+ representation in SRE

Building on the wider theme of normalising LGBTQ+-inclusive SRE outlined in Section 6.3, this subsection explores participants' frustration with the lack of meaningful LGBTQ+ representation in their current provision. Many felt that SRE does not reflect the diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities within their schools, expressing this through comments such as "this is so annoying" (Daf: School B-G3.TV) and through non-verbal cues like eye-rolling. These expressions of frustration were reinforced through group interaction, as participants responded to and validated one another's concerns, suggesting a shared emotional response to the absence of LGBTQ+ representation. For some, this absence created feelings of exclusion and invisibility; for others, it limited their understanding of key topics such as consent, healthy relationships, and identity development within LGBTQ+ contexts:

Daf: how do we know what a safe LGBTQ+ relationship looks like if we don't talk about it in our lessons? (School B-G3.TV)

Jay: you could look online? (School B-G3.TV)

Daf: I think it's better for us to have the information from school cos it's not safe online. (School B-G3.TV)

The recurrence of these views across all three schools suggests this is not an isolated concern but a systemic gap in the curriculum. Daf and Jay's exchange highlights the need for safe, respectful spaces where young people feel empowered to engage in open dialogue about topics that reflect their lived

experiences. While some participants had sought information online (6.4.1), their comments reveal a clear expectation for schools to provide comprehensive, trustworthy education on LGBTQ+ relationships. This consistent call for LGBTQ+ inclusive and relevant SRE echoes national guidance, which advocates for LGBTQ+ education as essential to challenging stereotypes, reducing stigma, and fostering belonging among all learners (Welsh Government 2022a; Children's Commissioner for Wales 2022).

Additional frustrations emerged during group interviews, particularly when participants were asked, Did you have any information on LGBTQ+ relationships? (RQ4). Across all three schools, most noted that their SRE resource packs contained little to no content on LGBTQ+ relationships. This absence of material was repeatedly constructed by participants as evidence that LGBTQ+ identities were unimportant to the school's vision of SRE:

Jo: Not much in here about LGBT is there? (School B-G3.TV)

Participants described their SRE experiences as largely negative due to the limited knowledge provided about the LGBTQ+ community and the services available to them. Jo's observation, offered matter-of-factly, signals a normalised expectation that LGBTQ+ representation should be included; its absence becomes noteworthy and points to a curriculum that fails to mirror the diversity within the student body.

Rhys: Don't remember any of these lessons talking about LGBT people or relationships. (School A-G1.TV)

Participants were also unaware of any books or resources in their schools that could help them access knowledge about LGBTQ+ young people. Rhys's comment adds another layer by drawing attention to the persistent absence of LGBTQ+ content; he cannot recall any lesson that meaningfully acknowledged LGBTQ+ people. This suggests that invisibility is not incidental but consistent, shaping how students come to understand whose relationships are deemed important enough to be taught.

The resource pack lacked specific lessons for LGBTQ+ pupils, and some participants did not know who to approach for support when questioning their identity. Nieve said: “we have never been given any information you know like books or leaflets about LGBT young people in school” (School B-G4.TV), highlighting a lack of accessible knowledge pathways for LGBTQ+ youth, reinforcing how curricular silences translate into practical barriers to support. For some, this absence also raised concerns about who, if anyone, they could speak to within school:

Zen: If I wanted to speak to someone about being trans, who am I supposed to go to in my school? (School A-G2.TV)

Zen’s question encapsulates the uncertainty and vulnerability that arises when institutional structures fail to signal where help is located. This lack of signposting renders LGBTQ+ support both ambiguous and institutionally unrecognised, leaving young people to navigate identity questions in isolation. In this way, curricular gaps are experienced not merely as educational oversights but as barriers to emotional and relational safety.

Many participants expressed strong dissatisfaction with the absence of meaningful LGBTQ+ content in their SRE, using phrases such as “this is not good enough” and “this does not help with our needs.” These shared expressions of frustration act as a form of agency, allowing participants to articulate what they expect from SRE and to challenge the heteronormative limits of the current curriculum. For most, the concern was not merely limited content but a complete lack of LGBTQ+ representation; the majority reported receiving no meaningful LGBTQ+ material at all. This aligns with wider UK research showing that, despite policy commitments to inclusion, LGBTQ+ topics often remain absent or marginalised in practice (Renold 2016; King-Hill 2020; Glazzard and Stones 2021b). Such omissions contribute to confusion and stigma, limiting young people’s confidence to engage safely and knowledgeably with diverse identities and relationships (Renold 2016; King-Hill 2020a; Glazzard and Stones 2021).

6.3.2 Misconceptions and missed opportunities in LGBTQ+ SRE

Participants who did recall SRE lessons including information about LGBTQ+ explained that the content was limited to STI related risks, rather than offering broader understanding. Several participants linked this risk-heavy approach to the wider school culture, explaining that LGBTQ+ topics “never really get talked about” and are usually “left out of lessons”(FN), making it feel like something teachers avoid rather than something they treat as normal. Many expressed confusion and concern about the lack of clarity, representation, and LGBTQ+ inclusivity:

Owen: I remember when we had a lesson on STI’s we were told that LGBT people need to make sure they use condoms.... and those things on the table (he points to a dental dam, and one participant lifts it up and throws it at Owen, participants in the workshop laugh and some disruption occurs). So, does this mean LGBT people have more chance of having an STI then? well, that was my impression anyway. (School B-G3.TV)

Jo: Yeh ... I know gay people can have HIV and AIDS, but does this mean you can get it if your straight.... I’m confused? (School B-G3.TV)

Annabelle: Why don’t we have information about LGBTQ+ relationships in SRE.... is it because they [SRE teachers] think we will turn gay if they talk to us about it? (School B-G3.TV)

Jo: Isn’t it against the law to have gay sex ...so maybe that’s why they don’t tell us? (School B-G3.TV)

These comments reflect widespread confusion and illustrate missed opportunities to explore sex, gender, and sexuality in a safe, informed, and LGBTQ+ inclusive way. While some misconceptions were addressed during the interviews, it was clear that participants had not received adequate education to support their understanding, development, and wellbeing. Jo’s comment reveals a troubling misconception, that same-sex relationships are illegal, highlighting the consequences of inadequate SRE. In a safe and LGBTQ+ inclusive learning environment, she might have understood that LGBTQ+ identities are not only legal but also valid and protected.

This misunderstanding highlights how the lack of clear, supportive education can fuel harmful myths and internalised stigma, contributing to shame, confusion, and fear, particularly for young people questioning their identity. Research consistently shows that when schools fail to provide LGBTQ+-inclusive, supportive information about sexuality and gender, young people are more likely to experience internalised stigma, confusion, and emotional distress (NASP 2020; Stevenson and Sandman 2024; Sousa and Gato 2024). This reinforces the need for SRE that is not only medically accurate but also socially and legally informed.

At the very least, all young people, particularly those who identify as LGBTQ+, should be able to explore these topics positively and feel supported in school. Many young people hold identities, gender expressions, and relationship experiences that do not align with traditional heterosexual or cisnormative expectations, and failing to recognise this diversity can seriously affect their wellbeing. A substantial body of research shows that exclusion, stigma, and non-LGBTQ+-inclusive schooling environments are associated with higher levels of psychological distress, low self-esteem, self-harm, and suicidality among LGBTQ+ young people (Kosciw et al. 2022; Taylor and Peter 2023). Without access to supportive, LGBTQ+-inclusive education during this critical developmental period, the long-term consequences can be profound, affecting not only mental health but also young people's sense of identity, belonging, and future life outcomes (Toomey 2021; Sousa and Gato 2024).

6.3.3 Participants' preference for external professionals in LGBTQ+ inclusive SRE delivery

When asked, who should facilitate SRE to young people? A clear theme emerged across all group interviews: participants overwhelmingly preferred external facilitators over school teachers, especially for LGBTQ+ inclusive SRE. Most participants expressed discomfort with teachers delivering these lessons, citing concerns about teachers' limited expertise and participants' lack of trust, as well as their own embarrassment and fear of being judged:

Daf: What if they... [teachers]...think about us differently or they may judge us wrongly because of something we say or ask about sex? You wouldn't ask them about LGBTQ+ relationships would you ...what do they know? (School B-G3.TV)

Daf's concerns capture the wider sentiment expressed across the interviews, where judgement, lack of expertise, and discomfort in teacher-pupil dynamics were seen as major barriers to open discussion. His comment illustrates how young people anticipate negative evaluation and mistrust teachers' knowledge about LGBTQ+ relationships, making them reluctant to seek information or ask questions. This reflects the broader pattern of participants wanting to distance SRE from the everyday authority figures they interact with in school.

Only two participants suggested family members as an alternative: to educate us about sex and relationships (FN), but the consensus strongly favoured youth workers, school nurses, and external agencies such as Calan Domestic Violence Services (CDVS) and Women's Aid (WA). Participants consistently viewed these professionals as more approachable and better trained. For example, Lilly questioned teachers' lack of specialist knowledge, asking: "Teachers are not experts in SRE, like they are in other subjects?" (School A-G1.TV). This view was reinforced by CJ, who doubted the accuracy of teacher-led sessions, asking: "If they are not experts, how can they give us the right answers?" and further suggesting, they may be trying to frighten us and stop us having sex? (School B-G4.TV). For many, embarrassment was a major barrier as described by:

Ed: I like my teacher... but there is no way I'm going to ask her a question about sex. (School B-G3.TV)

Kate: It's dead embarrassing...we have to face them [teachers] every day. (School B-G4.TV)

These feelings were heightened when discussing LGBTQ+ topics, which participants described as more personal and therefore riskier to disclose in front of teachers. Concerns about confidentiality added further anxiety; as Jenna described: "what if they tell our parents?" (School B-G4.TV). Some participants also questioned whether teachers' personal beliefs might influence what was taught. Nieve expressed discomfort at the idea that teachers might draw on their

own experiences, saying: “well, they must be telling us these things based on their own experience of sex, that’s sick like” (School B-G4.TV). In contrast, youth workers and external practitioners were described as: awesome, and able to answer all our questions (Darcy: School A-G2.TV), reinforcing the perception that external professionals provided safer, more LGBTQ+ inclusive spaces.

These findings reflect existing literature on the limitations of teacher-led SRE. Pound et al. (2016) observed that embarrassment and discomfort, largely stemming from the teacher-pupil relationship, can act as barriers to open discussion. Concerns about judgment, confidentiality, and bias align with Shibuya et al. (2023), who highlight how personal beliefs may influence SRE provision. Alldred et al. (2003) similarly argue that many teachers lack the confidence and specialist training required for effective SRE. Participants’ preference for external professionals therefore appears closely linked to these structural limitations. Ullman and Ferfolja (2018) emphasise that effective gender and sexuality education requires facilitators who are well-trained, LGBTQ+ inclusive, and able to create safe, equitable and non-judgmental learning environments. Traits that are not exclusive to external providers but are often difficult for untrained teachers to meet within school settings.

6.3.4 Positive experiences with external facilitators: Why participants value LGBTQ+ inclusive SRE

Building on participants’ preference for external facilitators (6.3.3), this section illustrates why participants believe these facilitators were more LGBTQ+ inclusive. During group interviews, many participants reflected positively on SRE sessions delivered by external agencies. Fieldwork notes captured their enthusiasm, with comments such as “the lesson was so funny,” “such a good laugh and you could ask them anything,” and “I didn’t feel we were being judged” (FN). Others valued the practical advice they received, including where to access help, condoms, sexual health services, and local LGBTQ+ support groups.

Participants consistently described external facilitators as knowledgeable and approachable, reinforcing their perception of these professionals as experts in SRE. They felt facilitators should be “educated” and “knowledgeable” about SRE,

qualities they associated with professionals from outside agencies (FN). This perception was echoed across all schools and illustrated through participant reflections:

Lilly: I wasn't afraid to ask the woman [youth worker] a question cos she put us into small groups and came around and sat with us and checked we were ok and if we wanted to ask anything we weren't sure about... she also told us where we could go and see her if we needed support or more info like after the lesson ... me and a few of my friends went after school. (School A-G1.TV)

Jay: The nurse was brilliant, and she had loads of fun games and quizzes I liked that lesson... she knew everything about STI's ... she said we could ask her anything. (School B-G3.TV)

Daf: Yeah, the lessons were so much fun...it's not like that when our teacher delivers it.... and they [school nurse] talked more about LTGBQ+ people and services. (School B-G3.TV)

Some participants also appreciated practical resources, take-home materials, and the informal "cool" style of youth workers, describing them as knowledgeable and easy to talk to (FN). These reflections highlight the value participants placed on interactive, LGBTQ+ inclusive, and non-judgmental learning environments. While such environments are not exclusive to external professionals, youth workers, nurses, and other trained facilitators are often better equipped, through specialist training, confidence, and different relational dynamics, to create them in practice. Many participants described these sessions as engaging and informative, citing facilitators' subject knowledge, openness to questions, and ease in addressing sensitive topics as key to their effectiveness:

Rhodri: the woman from the youth service we had we call her the condom lady... she was so confident like a human Google... had such funny games ... we weren't stuck in our seats for the whole lesson either and none of the boys played up like they do in the class with miss. (School A-G2.TV)

Crucially, participants emphasised that external facilitators were more comfortable and knowledgeable when discussing LGBTQ+ identities, relationships, and support services. As Daf noted earlier, school-based sessions rarely addressed LGBTQ+ topics meaningfully, whereas external professionals: talked more about LTGBQ+ people and services (School B-G3.TV). This was echoed across

multiple groups, where young people described feeling safer and “not judged” when asking questions connected to sexuality or identity.

The ability of youth workers to normalise diverse experiences and respond without embarrassment was particularly valued by LGBTQ+ participants and allies. For example, James appreciated that external workers “weren’t embarrassed, you could ask them anything” (School B-G4.TV), while others highlighted how facilitators provided targeted signposting to local LGBTQ+ support groups, inclusive sexual health services, and safe community spaces. These moments illustrate how specialist-led SRE was experienced as not only more knowledgeable, but more attuned to young people’s lived realities, including those relating to gender and sexuality.

Practical advice and clear signposting, to condoms, sexual health clinics, and LGBTQ+ support, were also highly valued. For many participants, this LGBTQ+ inclusive and affirming approach distinguished external facilitators from teachers, whose perceived discomfort or limited expertise had restricted previous discussions about sexuality and identity. These insights reinforce participants’ view of external facilitators as more knowledgeable, relatable, and trustworthy than school staff, echoing earlier concerns about teacher-led SRE. This pattern aligns with wider research showing that young people consistently favour specialist-led SRE for its credibility, LGBTQ+ inclusivity, and relevance to their lived experiences (Allen 2011; Quinlivan 2019; King-Hill 2020; Renold et al. 2023).

6.3.5 Teacher discomfort in delivering LGBTQ+ SRE: Participants’ perceptions

Group interviews across all schools revealed why participants preferred not to have teachers deliver SRE lessons and how this affected their learning. A recurring theme was teacher discomfort; many participants observed that teachers appeared visibly embarrassed, especially when covering topics like LGBTQ+ issues. This discomfort often manifested as a lack of confidence or an avoidance of discussion, leading teachers to sidestep questions altogether. For

example, Jo described how one teacher responded when asked a basic question about sexual orientation:

Jo: when one of the boys asked Miss [teacher] what does it mean to be gay, she [teacher] said that the nurse will be discussing that when she comes in to talk to you in year 10 and she was red in the face...we could tell she was definitely embarrassed. (School B-G3.TV)

Jo's account illustrates how teacher discomfort can lead to the deferral of LGBTQ+ topics specifically within SRE lessons. In this example, the teacher redirects a pupil's question about being gay to a future session with the school nurse, signaling that she felt unprepared or lacking in confidence. This response occurred in the context of an SRE lesson, and the visible embarrassment communicated to pupils that LGBTQ+ discussions may be awkward or inappropriate. Such reactions can discourage open discussion and leave young people's questions unanswered and their needs unmet.

Similar experiences were shared across all schools, with participants frequently recalling teachers who appeared uncomfortable when delivering SRE lessons. These repeated observations suggest that teachers themselves may experience discomfort or a lack of confidence when addressing certain SRE topics, particularly when they have not received adequate training. This aligns with existing research showing that teachers commonly report feeling embarrassed, underprepared, and anxious when teaching SRE (Rose et al. 2019; Fox and Riley 2025). This reflects wider arguments that school environments often assume heterosexuality as the norm, which shapes what teachers feel comfortable discussing and what topics are avoided. As a result, institutional expectations and teacher-pupil dynamics can constrain open discussion about sexuality, leading to the marginalisation of LGBTQ+-inclusive or emotionally sensitive topics (Martino 2000; Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli 2005).

6.3.6 Teacher-pupil relationships: Their impact on SRE engagement

During the group interviews, several participants reflected on the emotional impact of receiving SRE from their teachers. While much of this discomfort related

to SRE more broadly, participants explained that these dynamics became even more restrictive when discussions involved LGBTQ+ topics, as the risk of judgement felt greater. Participants described feeling “uncomfortable” or “embarrassed” when taught sensitive content by familiar teachers, noting how the teacher-pupil relationship could inhibit open discussion.

Some participants linked these feelings directly to LGBTQ+ content. Rhys explained: “I wouldn’t feel comfortable asking my teacher about gay sex” (School A-G1.TV). His reluctance points to deeper issues of trust and inclusivity, showing how emotional discomfort, not only teacher behaviour, can discourage questions and silence LGBTQ+-related learning needs. These dynamics also reinforced participants’ belief that teacher-led SRE does not always offer emotionally safe or judgement-free spaces.

Collectively, these accounts help explain why young people consistently preferred trained external facilitators. Their perceived expertise and distance from everyday school relationships were seen as essential for creating safer, more LGBTQ+-inclusive learning environments where LGBTQ+ topics could be discussed openly. Research reflects similar patterns, showing that teacher-led SRE often evokes embarrassment, fear of judgement, and concerns about confidentiality (Waling et al. 2020; Estyn 2021; NSPCC Cymru; Welsh Government 2024). My findings echo this wider evidence but also show that these barriers intensify when pupils wish to discuss LGBTQ+ identities, relationships, and experiences, highlighting the specific need for LGBTQ+-inclusive and emotionally safe SRE provision. These insights support wider calls for flexible delivery models, such as external facilitators, gender-separated sessions, or peer-led approaches, to ensure emotionally safe and LGBTQ+-inclusive environments, particularly in contexts where teachers are perceived as uncomfortable or unapproachable (Allen, 2011; Hirst, 2014).

6.4 “We needed this sooner”: Calls for LGBTQ+ inclusive SRE in primary schools

The absence of early LGBTQ+-inclusive SRE provision not only shaped participants' primary school experiences but also influenced where they later turned for information. Participants explained that lacking LGBTQ+ inclusive provision in primary school left them without the language, understanding, or support they needed. As they grew older, this gap meant they increasingly relied on online sources, peers, or pornography to fill these spaces. A central theme across the group interviews was the urgent need for early, LGBTQ+ inclusive SRE in primary schools. When asked: What age do you think young people should start having SRE lessons?, most participants, apart from two who were unsure, agreed that SRE should begin in primary school and include LGBTQ+ identities.

Participants felt that early LGBTQ+-inclusive SRE would better reflect the diversity of the world around them, support future relationship understanding, and normalise conversations about sexuality and gender before secondary school. They believed this could help prevent discrimination and bullying of LGBTQ+ children both in and beyond school settings. This concern is echoed in Renold et al. (2023b), whose youth-led research includes specific findings on LGBTQ+ inclusive RSE and shows that young people experience current provision as patchy, often too late, and lacking consistent, affirming content. Across this work, young people consistently expressed a desire for earlier, more reliable, and more LGBTQ+-inclusive RSE in schools.

The call for earlier intervention aligns with wider concerns raised by young people, LGBTQ+ organisations, and researchers (see Chapter Two), who advocate for LGBTQ+-inclusive education as a means of fostering emotional safety and respect. However, it is important to note that what counts as 'inclusive' is contested. As discussed, many LGBTQ+-inclusive approaches focus on adding representational content without challenging the wider heteronormative and cisnormative cultures that shape the whole school environment, not just classroom teaching. Situating participants' calls for earlier SRE within this debate highlights that they were advocating not for tokenistic LGBTQ+ inclusion but for approaches that actively disrupt restrictive school norms (Quinlivan 2019).

The consequences of this early absence were evident in participants' accounts of bullying and exclusion. Rhys described the long-term impact of homophobic abuse that began in primary school:

Rhys: I have had boys shout out at me you are disgusting...a faggot... oh and the usual gay boy... it's been like this for years. Even in the primary school. I have even been threatened to be beaten up and sometimes spat on. I didn't choose to be gay it chose me. (School A-G1.TV)

Rhys's account reveals the severity and persistence of homophobic bullying and the failure of school environments to safeguard pupils. The emotional weight of his words conveys a profound sense of helplessness and internalised stigma, likely reinforced through repeated discrimination. Rhys was not alone. Many participants described similar experiences, either directly or through witnessing peers being targeted. Kate expressed frustration at the abuse directed at her friends: "I don't like it when people talk to my friends like this, it hurts them and us, we are quite protective of Rhys" (School A-G1.TV). James highlighted the discomfort of guilt by association: "I never know what to say when people shout out and call us names, it's been going on for years" (School B-G4.TV). These accounts illustrate how stigma circulates not only around LGBTQ+ young people but also around those associated with them. Experiences of exclusion also intersected with LGBTQ+-related gender diversity. CJ reflected on early isolation:

CJ: I didn't have many friends even in the junior school they said I was odd... I dint fit in, and the bullying started early ... I don't think the teachers understood me... except for one anyway. (School A-G4.TV)

These experiences highlight that delaying LGBTQ+-inclusive SRE until secondary school denied participants the early recognition and language they need, contributing directly to the exclusion and harm they described from their primary years. These narratives highlight the consequences of insufficient recognition and support for LGBTQ+-related gender diversity at primary level. As Renold (2005) argues, primary schools often rely on ideas of childhood innocence that exclude open discussion of gender and sexuality, reinforcing heterosexuality and cisgender identity as the assumed norm. This helps explain why participants

described being labelled odd, misunderstood, or silenced, and how these norms shaped classroom cultures.

Calls for earlier LGBTQ+-inclusive SRE were also linked to identity development. Zen explained how a lack of recognition of LGBTQ+-related gender diversity affected them: “I didn’t feel like a girl or boy when we talked about puberty, it would have been good for the teacher to tell us that it’s ok” (School A-G2.TV). Similarly, CJ described how limited language constrained early self-understanding: “my family call me a tomboy, I think of myself as non-binary, I don’t think my family get it” (School B-G4.TV). Participants felt that having accurate language earlier would have helped both them and their families understand LGBTQ+-related gender diversity, reducing confusion and stigma. Others, such as Rhys, believed that early SRE could have reduced isolation: “I have known I was gay since junior school” (School A-G1.TV). Across interviews, participants consistently stated that earlier guidance could have prevented or reduced the negative experiences they faced.

Family silence also shaped young people’s early understandings of gender and sexuality. Stacy explained the confusion and secrecy surrounding her sister’s sexuality at home: “we weren’t allowed to discuss it in our house, my grandparents still don’t know, we still can’t tell our family” (School B-G3.TV). Daf echoed this, emphasising how early SRE could have helped normalise difference:

Daf: If the teachers had talked about these things in the primary school, I think it would have been easier for me ... and other kids would know about how different people ... kids like me are wouldn’t they? I’m still afraid to tell people... it’s like coming out every time. (School B-G3.TV)

These accounts collectively demonstrate the profound emotional, social, and educational consequences of inadequate LGBTQ+ inclusion. Research consistently shows that hostile school climates undermine safety, belonging, and engagement for gender and sexuality diverse young people (Renold 2005; Kosciw et al. 2013; Stevenson and Sandman 2024). Psychological studies further connect prolonged stigma with poorer wellbeing, including anxiety, depression, and school avoidance (Walton and Cohen 2007)

Collectively, these insights show a clear developmental trajectory: the absence of LGBTQ+-inclusive SRE in primary school left participants without the language, understanding, or support they needed at a formative age. This early gap did not resolve as they moved into secondary school but instead accumulated, leading many to seek information online or from peers as their primary sources of learning, exposing them to misinformation, pornography, or unsafe digital spaces.

6.4.1 “We had to Google it”: Online and peer-based LGBTQ+ learning as a primary source of SRE

The lack of early LGBTQ+ inclusive SRE directly shaped where participants later turned for knowledge. Research consistently shows that many young people learn about sex, relationships, and sexuality online, where content is varied, accessible, and largely unregulated (Power et al. 2024; UNESCO 2020). UK studies similarly report that young people feel they must educate themselves because school provision is inconsistent or inadequate (Renold et al. 2023). LGBTQ+ young people in particular rely heavily on digital sources due to gaps in inclusive provision (Gamson and Hertz 2023).

This trend was reflected across the group interviews. Participants explained that school-based SRE failed to address LGBTQ+ relationships and gender diversity, leaving them little option but to search online and self-educate. Daf captured this clearly: “everything I know about LGBTQ+ I had to find out from the internet, I’m not sure the information is accurate mind” (School B-G3.TV). Others echoed this sense of necessity rather than choice.

For others, the internet offered instant access and a sense of community. Lilly (School A-G1.TV) described how: “You can find everything out from Google, and you can access loads of LGBT stuff and sites on there.” Lilly’s enthusiasm, however, contrasted with concerns raised by participants who felt overwhelmed by the volume and concerned about the reliability of online content. James (School B-G4.TV), for example, explained that while online information helped him support a friend: “there are some iffy sites on there.” In contrast, Ben (School

B-G4.TV) described moving from online searching to peer-based LGBTQ+ youth support, where he felt accepted and informed: “the staff are pretty cool, they don’t judge us, and we can be ourselves.” This shift highlights how some young people sought safer, relational learning environments beyond digital spaces. These accounts illustrate how the lack of early, LGBTQ+-inclusive SRE in school pushed many participants toward online spaces as their primary source of information, exposing them to misinformation and potential harm.

Concerns about risk were also prominent. Darcy (School A-G2.TV) said: “I don’t go on the internet now, cos there are some dodgy sites”, linking this to fears of “getting into trouble” or receiving inaccurate information. Daf and CJ described feeling emotionally isolated when unable to seek support from parents or non-LGBTQ+ peers, reinforcing the need for trusted school-based provision. When asked what participants meant by “dodgy”, “iffy”, and “risk”, many associated these with potential encounters with online predators, often referring to “pedophiles looking for access to children” (FN), information often passed on by parents or siblings.

Pornography also formed a significant part of young people’s online learning. Tom (School A-G1.TV) commented: “well, how else are we going to learn how to have sex then?” and Rhys added: “we all do it”, highlighting how pornography filled gaps in formal SRE. Participants recognised its limitations. Rhyddian noted peers using pornography “for tips on how to have sex”, while Angharad described “girls feeling pressured to copy what they saw”. Jenna questioned its realism: “they are acting, how can this be normal?” For LGBTQ+ young people, the absence of LGBTQ+-inclusive SRE intensified this reliance. Daf explained: “gay porn is easy to look up, where else do we get information?” CJ noted that “pornography rarely reflected non-binary identities.”

Overall, participants turned to the internet and peers because school provision did not meet their needs. While digital spaces offered LGBTQ+ representation, community, and identity-specific knowledge, they also created confusion, misinformation, and exposure to harmful content. Without trusted adults who could support their learning in affirming ways, LGBTQ+ participants in particular

described feeling isolated and unsure, reflecting wider concerns about the risks created by structural gaps in SRE (Gamson and Hertz 2023). Their accounts demonstrate how inadequate provision pushes LGBTQ+ young people toward unregulated online sources, shaping learning experiences that are unsupported, uneven, and at times unsafe.

6.5 Participants recommendations for LGBTQ+ inclusive SRE

When participants were asked during group interviews, How can SRE be improved to ensure it is more inclusive? Several consistent suggestions emerged across all three schools. These included the need for trained and confident LGBTQ+-aware educators; the inclusion of diverse and non-heteronormative relationships; non-judgmental and fully LGBTQ+-inclusive classroom environments; and SRE that meets young people's needs, so they do not rely on unsafe online information.

Across the schools, participants emphasised that LGBTQ+-inclusive SRE must be delivered by educators who have both confidence and specialist knowledge in LGBTQ+ content. Without this, they felt teachers often avoided LGBTQ+ topics or delivered them inaccurately. This point was summed up most clearly by Daf:

Daf: Lessons should be delivered by people who had training in LGBTQ+ with young people and are confident. (School B-G3.TV)

Participants consistently linked educator confidence and training to the overall quality and LGBTQ+-inclusivity of SRE, noting that poorly informed teaching contributed to discomfort, misinformation, or complete exclusion of LGBTQ+ content. This reflects a broader desire for LGBTQ+-inclusive SRE that is grounded in professional competence and genuine understanding. Participants also challenged the heteronormative framing of current SRE provision. For many, the predominance of heterosexual examples meant that LGBTQ+ identities and relationships were either absent or treated as exceptional rather than normal. Ben expressed this clearly:

Ben: talk to us about all kinds of relationships, not just straight ones... we want LGBT stuff to be normal. (School B-G4.TV)

Ben's comment highlights a desire for LGBTQ+-inclusive SRE that reflects diverse identities as a norm rather than an addition. Several participants noted that the lack of representation left LGBTQ+ young people feeling invisible or marginalised in lessons intended to support all pupils' wellbeing. Participants spoke about the need for LGBTQ+-inclusive SRE environments where they felt accepted, respected, and able to participate fully. While curriculum content was important, they emphasised that the culture of SRE delivery, how teachers spoke, whether they used correct names, and whether they treated all pupils equally, was just as significant. This was captured clearly by CJ:

CJ: Don't judge us, and don't exclude us from lessons, SRE should be about everyone. (School B-G4.TV)

Their reflections suggest that LGBTQ+-inclusion is not solely about what is taught but how it is taught (LGBTQ+-inclusive pedagogy), mirroring earlier findings around pupils' rights to express their identities safely. Several participants described experiences of feeling dismissed or misunderstood, reinforcing the urgent need for a whole-school approach that embeds respect, recognition, and equality. Participants also expressed concern that inadequate or exclusionary SRE forces young people, particularly LGBTQ+ youth, to seek information online, where content may be inaccurate or harmful. As James explained:

James: If they don't give it to us then we will go online, and it's not safe... so we need it in school. (School B-G4.TV)

This highlights safeguarding implications, reinforcing that LGBTQ+-inclusive SRE is not only a matter of representation but also of safety and harm prevention. Participants framed SRE as a protective factor, especially for those who may lack access to reliable or affirming information elsewhere. Many participants also identified a need for greater involvement in shaping an LGBTQ+-inclusive SRE curriculum. Participants expressed frustration that decisions about LGBTQ+

content were being made for them rather than with them. This was articulated powerfully by Sam:

Sam: We have never been asked about what stuff we want to talk about.... you know LGBTQ+ stuff so how do they know what we want. Oh, and what about the names they call us.... you now.... like.... when they call us by our first name like Samantha and I want to be called Sam for obvious reasons (Sam points to his body using both hands). I don't want to be a girl, right? There is one teacher ...and a few other kids...it doesn't matter how many times you tell them they still call me Samantha...what's that about? I Thought I had rights? (School A-G1.TV)

Sam's experience reflects a broader pattern of exclusion and lack of consultation. His account also highlights the emotional harm caused by misgendering; reinforcing the need for educators to adopt LGBTQ+-inclusive practices such as respecting names and pronouns. These insights align strongly with young people's rights to identity and participation, as outlined in the UNCRC and discussed in the introduction to my thesis. Several participants shared deeply personal experiences, including disclosures of sexuality or gender identity. These moments revealed the importance of creating safe spaces in SRE where young people feel respected and able to express themselves without judgement. Such openness provided valuable insight into the emotional impact of exclusion and the potential of LGBTQ+-inclusive SRE to foster trust, empathy, and peer support. This included the importance of names and pronouns, as highlighted by CJ: "we don't get the chance to use pronouns in our school, people who teach us SRE don't know what this means to us" (School B-G4.TV). CJ's explanation of choosing their own name further illustrates how identity development is shaped, and often constrained, by school practices:

CJ: Calling myself CJ was one of the first things I was able to change... I would have liked to have changed it in primary school, but I didn't know I could. (School B-G4.TV)

These experiences make clear that misgendering and the failure to respect chosen names and pronouns are not isolated oversights but indicators of wider gaps in LGBTQ+-inclusive practice, reinforcing why participants stressed the need for well-trained, LGBTQ+-aware educators. These reflections highlight

significant gaps in practice, demonstrating how schools can unintentionally undermine young people's right to identity by not recognising chosen names or pronouns. Participants called for SRE that is introduced earlier, delivered LGBTQ+-inclusively, and embedded within whole-school cultures of respect and recognition. These findings are strongly supported by current research. Fox and Riley (2025) highlight the need for improved educator training, echoing Daf's concerns. Jobson (2023) documents how LGBTQ+ young people often feel excluded by heteronormative SRE, aligning with Ben and CJ's experiences. Bower-Brown et al. (2022) link misgendering to emotional harm, reflected in Sam's account. Scholars such as Renold et al. (2021) and Schaub et al. (2023) emphasise the importance of co-producing SRE with LGBTQ+ youth to ensure relevance, authenticity, and empowerment. Together, participants' insights call for SRE that recognises young people as rights-holders and active contributors, and that affirms the diversity of identities present within school communities. Collectively, these insights offer a coherent set of recommendations for change at the level of curriculum, pedagogy, school culture, and policy.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter examined participants' perspectives on the absence of LGBTQ+ and gender-related content in school-based SRE. Workshop and interview data revealed consistent calls for LGBTQ+-inclusive, representative, and emotionally safe provision. Participants emphasised the importance of visibility, earlier intervention, and provision by trained and often external SRE educators. Their experiences of exclusion, stigma, and misinformation align with wider evidence that non-LGBTQ+-inclusive SRE contributes to emotional distress, invisibility, and reduced confidence (Allen 2011; Renold 2013; Formby 2017; King Hill 2020; Goldfarb and Lieberman 2021). Three core insights structured the chapter: the need to normalise LGBTQ+ content across the curriculum, the need to introduce it earlier, and the need to improve the LGBTQ+-inclusivity and accuracy of provision. Participants' accounts also highlighted the emotional intensity of

non-LGBTQ+-inclusive SRE; including shame, fear of judgement, and the effects of bullying.

These insights further demonstrated how curricular silence and late SRE provision created conditions in which stigma, confusion, and identity-based harm could flourish. Participants' calls for co-production, respect for chosen names and pronouns, and recognition of diverse identities reflect LGBTQ+-inclusive education principles (UNICEF 2025) and legal obligations under Article 24 of the UNCRC (Quinlivan 2019). Their support for earlier provision reinforces evidence that LGBTQ+-inclusive SRE can reduce bullying and foster empathy (Walton and Cohen 2007; Stonewall 2020). Strong preferences for external facilitators, and discomfort with teacher-led sessions underline the need for specialist-led and youth-centred approaches that support emotional safety. These preferences also reflect participants' perceptions that teacher discomfort and limited expertise inhibited open dialogue and meaningful engagement. These findings also highlight tensions between young people's voice and agency, where opportunities to express their identities and experiences did not always translate into meaningful influence over SRE provision. These experiences were shaped by power relations and varying levels of psychological safety, which influenced how confidently young people engaged with LGBTQ+ topics and how their contributions were recognised.

Overall, the chapter demonstrates the need for a whole-school approach to LGBTQ+-inclusive SRE that is co-produced with young people, embedded across the curriculum, and responsive to their ages, identities, and lived experiences. This is both a pedagogical priority and a rights-based entitlement and has since been introduced in Wales (see Children's Commissioner for Wales 2022; Welsh Government 2022a). These findings also complement the ongoing Welsh Government work on supporting trans and non-binary learners, reinforcing the need for consistent and rights-affirming practices that recognise and protect young people's identities, pronouns, and lived experiences (Welsh Government 2023; 2026).

Chapter Seven - Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This chapter brings together the findings presented in Chapters Four, Five and Six to address the three research questions guiding the study. It is organised into three sections, each synthesising how the thematic analysis responds to RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3. The chapter then outlines the study's strengths and limitations, followed by recommendations for research, practice and policy, and concludes with a brief personal reflection on the research journey.

7.2 Research design, methodology, and questions

To achieve the study's aim, a four-phased participatory research design was adopted to ensure meaningful participation and co-production with young people

throughout the research process (3.6). This approach aligns not only with rights-based educational principles in Wales but also with established traditions in rights-based research, which emphasise young people's entitlement to contribute to decisions that affect them (Lundy 2007; Holland et al. 2010). Studies on youth participation highlight the importance of creating research spaces where young people can express their views through multimodal and creative methods (Cook-Sather 2022).

The research questions were shaped by key gaps identified in existing literature, particularly studies highlighting the lack of youth voice, limited LGBTQ+ inclusivity, and the dominance of risk focused approaches in school-based SRE provision in Wales (Allen 2011; Pound et al. 2016; Renold and McGeeney 2017a). Accordingly, the study was guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: What are young people's views and experiences of how sex and relationships education is provided in their school?
- RQ2: What opportunities have young people had to exercise their 'voice' and 'agency' regarding sex and relationships education in their school?
- RQ3: How can sex and relationships education be improved from young people's perspectives (e.g. content and pedagogy)?

To address these research questions, the study used a multimodal qualitative methodology incorporating participatory methods co-designed with young people from the NPT Youth Service. Data collection involved six activity-based workshops delivered to five participant groups, alongside five semi-structured group interviews, designed to explore participants' views, lived experiences, and suggestions for improving SRE. Three schools in NPT were recruited, with 27 participants aged 14–16 (Years 10 and 11) electing to take part.

A reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; 2019; 2021) was used to construct patterned meanings across the data. In line with this approach, themes were not assumed to 'emerge' from the data; rather, they were actively developed through an iterative, interpretive process involving coding, reflection, and

engagement with participants' accounts (Braun and Clarke 2021). The resulting themes represented shared meanings about how young people understood, experienced, and sought to influence SRE. These analytic themes then shaped the organisation of Chapters Four, Five, and Six.

7.3 How the findings address the research questions

This section synthesises the key findings presented in Chapters Four, Five, and Six and follow the conceptual framework outlined in Chapter Two. The following sub-sections (7.3.1, 7.3.2, and 7.3.3) outline how each analytic chapter responds directly to the study's research questions. As discussed in Chapter Two, youth voice and agency are central to effective RSE in Wales (Welsh Government 2022a). Furthermore, existing literature consistently highlights a persistent gap between policy rhetoric and young peoples lived experiences, with critiques of tokenistic consultation and adult-led assumptions (Allen 2011; Renold and McGeeney 2017a; Holland 2017b). The findings presented here directly speak to this gap. They align with longstanding critiques of limited youth voice limited opportunities for agency in SRE provision, but also provide contemporary, youth-led evidence that illustrates how these gaps are experienced in practice and what young people believe meaningful, rights-based, and LGBTQ+ inclusive SRE should look like. Each theme reflects how participants understand, experience, and seek to influence their education, offering insight into how their voices can be more effectively embedded in SRE curriculum design and provision.

7.3.1 RQ1: What are young people's views and experiences of how SRE is provided in their school?

Across all themes, participants described SRE as shaped by adult-controlled, risk-centred, avoidance-oriented, and heteronormative practices (4.3.2; 5.2.2; 6.3.2). These patterns closely align with wider critiques that school-based SRE often reinforces adult authority and restricts open dialogue (Bragg et al. 2022; Renold and McGeeney 2017a). While these patterns appeared, each analytic chapter contributed a distinct dimension of participants' experiences, rights and participation (Chapter Four), risk-focused pedagogy (Chapter Five), and LGBTQ+

inclusion (Chapter Six). Lessons often felt closed rather than collaborative, emotionally unsafe rather than supportive, and disconnected from young people's lived realities. This echoes longstanding arguments that SRE frequently fails to meet young people's developmental, emotional, and relational needs (Bragg et al. 2020; Renold and McGeeney 2017a). Participants consistently called for SRE that is participatory, respectful, LGBTQ+ inclusive, confidently facilitated, and responsive to the emotional and relational dimensions of their lives (4.5; 5.3; 6.3.4), mirroring international evidence on what constitutes effective and rights-based SRE (Pound et al. 2016; UNESCO 2018; Waling et al. 2020). Overall, the findings show that participants' views and experiences of SRE are shaped not simply by what is taught but by how it is delivered, by pedagogy, relational practice, inclusivity, and the extent to which educators recognise and respect learners' identities, questions, and concerns.

7.3.1.1 Adult-controlled SRE

Participants described SRE as “done to” them rather than “with” them, echoing critiques that participation in schools often remains limited or tokenistic (Lundy 2007; Mannion 2012; Cook-Sather 2006), a pattern also noted within SRE (Allen 2011). They highlighted the absence of meaningful consultation, and many reacted with anger and disbelief when learning that they should have been consulted annually since Year 7, expressing feelings of being “let down,” “fuming,” or “angry” (4.3.2). These emotional responses reflect the experiential weight of exclusion from a curriculum directly affecting their lives. This reaction aligns with evidence that exclusion from decision-making can generate frustration and emotional harm (Fielding 2001; Lundy 2018; King-Hill 2024b).

Participants attributed their exclusion to adult assumptions about age and competence “they just think we are only kids what do we know” (4.3.3), reinforcing findings that children are routinely positioned as less capable within educational structures (Mayall 2000; Tisdall and Punch 2012). Teacher behaviours: ignoring questions, dismissing contributions, shutting down attempts to participate (4.3.3), mirrored established patterns of avoidance in SRE teaching (Pound et al. 2016; Allen 2011). Over time, this non responsiveness led some participants to

disengage, not from apathy but because, as they put it, “what’s the point?” (4.3.3), a pattern reflected in critiques that young people withdraw when their views have no influence (Hart 1992; UNICEF 2025). For LGBTQ+ participants, the lack of consultation had heightened consequences. Without opportunities to express their needs, they encountered SRE that felt irrelevant, exclusionary, or rendering their identities invisible, consistent with evidence that curricular invisibility harms emotional wellbeing and identity development (Donovan and Formby 2020; Glazzard and Stones 2021; Sousa and Gato 2025). These early indications of LGBTQ+ exclusion are explored in greater depth in Chapter Six, which focuses specifically on the consequences of non-inclusive SRE. Chapter Four demonstrates how structural and relational barriers undermined agency, respect, and rights-based participation.

7.3.1.2 Risk-focused SRE

Participants described their SRE as dominated by fear-based messages about pregnancy, STIs, and risk, with some recalling being told that “sex is dangerous” or could “ruin your life” (5.2.1; 5.3), echoing longstanding critiques of danger centred SRE models (Fine 1988; Irvine 2009; Cense and Ganzevoort 2018). Lessons foregrounded fear without reassurance, context, or emotional support, leaving many feeling anxious, ashamed, or frightened to engage in sexual activity (5.2.3), a pattern also noted in studies of fear-based SRE (Pound et al. 2016; Van Ditzhuijzen and Overeem 2025). Gender diverse young people revealed how this risk centred, and reproductive focused content excluded trans and non-binary identities, describing SRE as “not for us” (5.2.1). This aligns with research that critiques the narrow, heteronormative framing of mainstream SRE (Formby 2017; Donovan and Formby 2020). Participants also expressed frustration at the absence of content on pleasure, intimacy, communication, and healthy relationships, asking, “why are we always told sex is bad for us?” (5.3). In response, many relied on online sources or pornography to fill these gaps (5.3.1). This reflects findings that young people turn online when school-based SRE feels incomplete or disconnected from their realities (Allen 2011; Van Ditzhuijzen and Overeem 2025).

Teacher discomfort again shaped emotional experiences. Avoidance, awkwardness, or shutting down discussion created classrooms where sexuality felt taboo, embarrassing, or framed through moral judgement (5.2.2; 5.3; 5.3.1), a dynamic also identified by Allen (2011) and Fox and Riley (2025). In contrast, sessions led by youth workers or nurses were described as open, relaxed, inclusive, “fun”, non-judgemental and “we can ask them anything” (5.2.6; 5.2.8), reflecting evidence that educator confidence is crucial for effective SRE (Pound et al. 2016 Waling et al. 2023). Chapter Five therefore reveals how risk-focused pedagogies produced fear, shame, silence, and learning gaps that pushed participants to seek information elsewhere.

7.3.1.3 Heteronormative and avoidance-oriented SRE

Participants described their SRE as heteronormative, exclusionary, and emotionally unsafe (6.3.2), reflecting persistent critiques of the lack of meaningful LGBTQ+ inclusion in school-based SRE (Renold 2005; Formby 2017; Donovan and Formby 2020). LGBTQ+ participants reported feeling invisible, “not included,” or “not normal” (6.3.1), illustrating how curricular silence produces curricular invisibility (Glazzard and Stones 2021; Fox and Riley 2025). Many felt unable to ask questions or seek help due to fear of being judged or “looked at differently” (6.3.3), and some did not know whom they could speak to in school (6.3.1). These experiences underlined the emotional and relational risks created by non-inclusive SRE. They also reported extensive experiences of homophobic and transphobic bullying across their schooling (6.4), reinforcing evidence that curricular silence contributes to hostile school cultures and leaves peers unequipped to challenge discrimination (Renold 2005; Formby 2017; Glazzard and Stones 2021), with profound emotional impacts caused by continued exclusion.

In Chapter Six, teacher discomfort took a highly specific form, centred on LGBTQ+ identities and relationships. Rather than avoiding sensitive topics more generally, teachers frequently deflected questions, changed the subject, or displayed visible embarrassment when LGBTQ+ issues arose. These reactions communicated that LGBTQ+ identities were taboo, inappropriate, or beyond the boundaries of “acceptable” classroom discussion (6.3.5). This form of avoidance intensified the

exclusion and invisibility described by LGBTQ+ participants, signalling that their identities did not belong within the curriculum (Formby and Donovan 2020; Fox and Riley 2025). By contrast, external facilitators were remembered as inclusive, knowledgeable, and affirming (6.3.4), offering the relational safety and validation that teacher-led sessions lacked. Chapter Six therefore illustrates that LGBTQ+ exclusion is not simply a content omission but an everyday practice of marginalisation that shapes young people's sense of identity, belonging, and wellbeing.

7.3.2 RQ2: What opportunities have young people had to exercise their “voice” and “agency” regarding SRE?

Across the three analytical chapters, participants' opportunities for voice and agency were minimal, inconsistent, and often absent, shaped by structural omissions, heteronormative curricula, and relational barriers that positioned them as passive recipients. Despite this, participants consistently demonstrated both the capacity and desire to exercise meaningful voice and agency, even though they rarely experienced either within school-based SRE. These findings reinforce distinctions between “voice” as expression and “agency” as influence, showing that while participants held clear concerns about lack of consultation, exclusion of LGBTQ+ content, teacher discomfort, and adult-controlled decision-making, they had no avenues within school-based SRE to express these views or influence provision. Instead, they could only articulate them through this research (Kellett 2019; Renold et al. 2024).

7.3.2.1 Lack of meaningful SRE participation or consultation

Participants indicated that they had limited, and often tokenistic opportunities to exercise voice and agency within school-based SRE. Although a small number of opportunities existed, these were mainly restricted to post-lesson reflections following externally facilitated sessions, and participants emphasised that these did not shape future lessons and therefore lacked meaningful influence (4.3.1). As Albury et al. (2013) argue, such superficial consultation erodes trust and silences voice, a pattern clearly reflected in participants' accounts.

Across all three schools, participants also described a complete absence of consultation at key curriculum moments, such as the introduction or review of the 2014 SRE pack, leading to repeated questions such as: “why haven’t we been asked?” (4.3.2). For LGBTQ+ and gender-diverse young people, this lack of involvement had tangible consequences, particularly regarding relevance, accuracy, and inclusivity. This aligns with literature describing SRE as heteronormative, outdated, and insufficiently responsive to diverse identities (Formby and Donovan 2020; Bower-Brown et al. 2022). Where consultation did occur, it was typically one-off, such as a single discussion about a pregnancy lesson, with no ongoing dialogue, feedback loops, or evidence of impact (4.3.2), contradicting Lundy’s (2007) emphasis on participation as requiring voice, audience, and influence.

Relational dynamics within schools also shaped opportunities for agency. Many participants felt adults perceived them as “too young” or immature to contribute meaningfully (4.3.3). They described teachers who “don’t listen” or who failed to take them “seriously” (4.3.3), reinforcing power-based critiques of youth voice (Lundy 2007; Mannion 2012). Teacher embarrassment and avoidance of questions further discouraged participation, leading some participants to feel there was no point engaging in processes unlikely to result in change (4.3.3). These dynamics contributed to a culture in which participants’ expertise was undervalued, echoing findings that adult discomfort and authority can marginalise youth voice (Conner 2022). As a result, many participants disengaged before being asked, anticipating that consultation would be ineffective (4.3.3). This mirrors Albury et al.’s (2013) argument that repeated dismissal leads to disillusionment and aligns with Holland’s (2017c) account of frustration at exclusion from decisions affecting them. In this context, disengagement became a rational response rather than apathy (King-Hill 2024b).

For LGBTQ+ and gender-diverse participants, agency was further constrained by heteronormative content, avoidance of LGBTQ+ topics, and poor signposting, prompting many to seek knowledge online, including social media and pornography (4.3.2; 4.3.3). This reflects wider evidence that inadequate SRE

pushes LGBTQ+ youth towards digital sources with mixed or harmful consequences (Stonewall 2017; Formby and Donovan 2020; Still 2022). In contrast, participants described greater opportunities for voice and agency in sessions delivered by youth workers or school nurses, who created trusted, discussion-based environments where participants felt respected and able to ask questions (4.3.3). Their preferences echo evidence that specialist facilitators are often viewed as more knowledgeable, trusted, and emotionally attuned than teachers (Hirst 2008; Fox and Riley 2025).

7.3.2.2 Adult authority, avoidance and risk-focused SRE provision suppress agency

Chapter Five shows that risk-led, harm-prevention models offered participants no meaningful opportunities to exercise voice or agency, reinforcing concerns about adult-controlled provision (Fine 1988; Allen 2011). Participants described being positioned as passive recipients of risk-focused messaging (5.3), with no opportunities to question, shape, or contribute to content. The exclusion of pleasure and LGBTQ+ content (5.3; 5.3.1) further restricted avenues for expression, echoing forms of silencing identified by Hirst (2013) and Allen (2011). Despite this, participants articulated clear visions for meaningful agency, including co-producing lessons, choosing topics, embedding LGBTQ+ inclusion, and adopting participatory pedagogies (5.4.2). These proposals align with rights-based, youth-centred SRE guidance (UNESCO 2018; Goldfarb and Lieberman 2021; Welsh Government 2022a).

7.3.2.3 Heteronormative SRE restricts LGBTQ+ voice and agency

In Chapter Six, participants revealed that they had no opportunities to shape LGBTQ+ inclusion within school-based SRE. They described SRE as heteronormative, non-inclusive, and adult-controlled, with decisions made for them rather than with them (6.2; 6.3; 6.3.1), reflecting wider evidence of LGBTQ+ marginalisation in SRE (Formby 2017; Allen and Rasmussen 2017; King-Hill 2020). The absence of LGBTQ+ content was experienced as exclusion, consistent with research showing that curricular invisibility silences marginalised groups

(Renold 2013; Sex Education Forum 2020). Participants proposed specific opportunities to increase voice and agency, including co-producing lessons, embedding LGBTQ+ identities across the curriculum, and introducing inclusive content earlier (6.5). While similar to the broader visions expressed in Chapter Five, these were framed specifically around LGBTQ+ inclusion. These desires align with participatory, rights-based pedagogies (Camarota and Fine 2010; Renold et al. 2023c). Their preference for trained external facilitators (6.3.3; 6.3.4) reinforces evidence that specialist educators can create safer and more inclusive spaces (Ullman and Ferfolja 2018).

7.3.3 RQ3: How can SRE be improved from young people's perspectives?

Together, these findings address RQ3 by outlining the structural, pedagogical and relational changes participants view as essential for high-quality SRE. They show that participants were active meaning-makers with clear expectations for rights-based participation, holistic and emotionally responsive teaching, and LGBTQ+ inclusive practice. Across the three themes, they call for embedded co-production, confident and relationally skilled educators, and pedagogies that affirm identity, agency and emotional wellbeing. Their perspectives echo research positioning young people as knowledgeable contributors to SRE design (Allen 2011; Ollis et al. 2022; Renold et al. 2024). Collectively, the research findings demonstrate how young people themselves evaluate SRE, specifically its timing (when it is provided), its content (what is taught), and its pedagogical approaches (how it is taught). This synthesis highlights persistent gaps between young people's lived experiences and current provision, revealing misalignments that continue to undermine rights-based, LGBTQ+ inclusive, and youth-informed SRE.

7.3.3.1 Meaningful participation in SRE

Chapter four demonstrates that participants emphasised the need for planned and meaningful participation in shaping SRE. They proposed youth-led SRE forums through which pupils could share their views and feed into wider youth participation structures, such as the Youth Council, alongside peer-led engagement opportunities (4.5). Participants advocated that these forums should

be supported by external partners such as the NPT Youth Service to strengthen communication between pupils and SRE staff, and they suggested embedding annual consultation systems to ensure continuity (4.5). They also stressed the importance of being involved in co-planning SRE, including “trialling lessons” through the forums so that content remained relevant and responsive to their needs (4.5). In addition, participants highlighted the value of anonymous mechanisms, such as a post-box system, to enable honest feedback without fear of judgement (4.5). Collectively, these insights align with wider evidence that meaningful participation requires ongoing, embedded processes rather than one-off consultation exercises (Lundy, 2007; Cook-Sather, 2006).

7.3.3.2 Holistic, positive and emotionally responsive SRE

Participants wanted a holistic, positive SRE curriculum that moves beyond narrowly framed risk-focused teaching. While they acknowledged the importance of information about pregnancy and STIs, they argued that lessons should also address the relational, emotional and pleasurable dimensions of sexuality, describing a desire for SRE that feels normalising and “a positive experience” (5.4.1). This aligns with research emphasising the value of pleasure inclusive and wellbeing oriented SRE in promoting agency and reducing shame (Allen, 2011; Goldfarb and Lieberman 2021; Mark et al. 2021). Participants highlighted the need for emotionally safe and participatory approaches, recommending co-created class agreements (5.4.2) and interactive, creative methods such as small-group discussions, storytelling, roleplay and anonymous Q&A formats (5.4.2). They also expressed a desire for shared ownership of the learning environment, including influence over curriculum content and decisions about “how SRE lessons are taught,” alongside calls for “teachers to listen to us” and “respect our views” (5.4.2). These approaches were viewed as essential for enabling open discussion of sensitive topics such as pleasure and consent without fear of embarrassment. Their preferences echo international calls for participatory, learner-centred and emotionally responsive SRE (Cammarota and Fine 2010; UNESCO 2023; Renold et al, 2024). Participants further stressed the importance of educator competence, noting the need for trained, confident adults who can deliver shame free, equitable and LGBTQ+ inclusive content (5.4.3). They described teacher discomfort or lack

of knowledge as a barrier to open discussion, reinforcing evidence that educator confidence, appropriate training and inclusive pedagogical practice are crucial for high quality SRE (Hirst 2008).

7.3.3.3 LGBTQ+ Inclusive and Identity-affirming SRE

This chapter demonstrates that a key priority for participants was LGBTQ+ inclusion, with young people calling for earlier and normalised discussion of diverse identities and relationships (6.4;6.5). They emphasised that SRE should “talk to us about all kinds of relationships” and stressed that respectful everyday practices, such as the use of correct pronouns and names, are essential for creating feelings of safety and belonging (6.5). Their experiences reflect broader concerns about heteronormative SRE, and the emotional harm caused by misrecognition and exclusion, as highlighted in recent studies of LGBTQ+ young people’s school experiences (Bower-Brown et al. 2023; Jobson 2023; Fox and Riley 2025). Importantly, they framed LGBTQ+ inclusive SRE as a safeguarding issue, explaining that when accurate and affirming content is absent in school, they seek answers online, where content may be unreliable or harmful (6.5). This mirrors wider research showing that, in the absence of formal SRE, many LGBTQ+ young people turn to digital and peer-led sources, where the quality and reliability of information varies significantly (Power et al. 2024). The chapter highlighted the need for a whole-school, co-produced approach to inclusive SRE that is embedded across the curriculum and responsive to young peoples’ identities and lived experiences.

7.4 Strengths and limitations of the study

It is important to first highlight the study’s strengths and the unique contribution it makes to the field of SRE in Wales. This research provides timely, context-specific insights into young people’s experiences of SRE in Welsh schools, addressing a clear gap in the literature: very few published studies explore young people’s views of SRE within Wales, and none focus specifically on a local authority context such as NPT. However, because the data were collected before the recent rise in young people using AI tools for relationship and sexual health

information, some emerging digital behaviours fall beyond the scope of the study. This study demonstrates that when young people are given structured opportunities for co-production rather than consultation, they generate new insights, shape research processes, and influence local practice in ways that strengthen rights-based, inclusive SRE.

While existing research reviews highlight concerns about youth voice and LGBTQ+ inclusivity in SRE (Renold and McGeeney 2017a), few studies have undertaken a focused, youth-led investigation of pupils' perspectives on a specific local SRE provision in Wales, particularly prior to the implementation of the national RSE reforms. The participatory, youth-centred design placed pupil voice at the core, aligning with rights-based research principles and recognising young people as experts in their own lives (Holland et al. 2010). By generating detailed, context-specific insights into how young people in NPT experienced and evaluated a locally developed SRE resource facilitated by external practitioners, the study provides evidence that can inform and support the ongoing roll-out of Wales's reformed, rights-based RSE approach. Although the findings echo patterns identified elsewhere, they offer locally grounded, youth-led reflections that speak directly to the priorities and challenges likely to arise as RSE continues to develop in Wales. In this sense, the study contributes applied, practice-relevant knowledge that complements broader national and international debates on inclusive and participatory SRE/RSE.

While the study was designed to centre young people's voices and promote participatory engagement in the co-production of SRE research, several limitations must be acknowledged. The research was conducted within one local authority in Wales and involved a small, context-specific group of young people. In line with qualitative research principles, the findings reflect the particular experiences and meanings constructed within these settings, rather than aiming to produce claims that extend across the wider local authority or Wales as a whole. Additionally, only three secondary schools out of the 11 in NPT participated, meaning the insights generated are shaped by the cultural, social, and educational contexts of these specific schools and may differ from those of young people in other parts of NPT or other regions of Wales. Although education

staff in all participating schools sought to include a diverse range of young people during recruitment, some groups remained under-represented. This limited representation may have influenced the perspectives and experiences reflected in the findings. Broadening the scope of future research to involve a wider range of young people across NPT, and potentially other regions of Wales, could enhance the inclusivity and breadth of perspectives captured.

Secondly, I carefully considered my dual role as an SRE practitioner researcher and how this positionality might have influenced participant engagement (Delamont and Atkinson 1995; Delamont et al. 2010; Cohen et al. 2017). To foster a safe and open environment, I was transparent about the study's aims and how participants' input would be used. I created a non-judgmental space using inclusive, youth-friendly activities, and relied on active listening as my primary interactional approach. This involved giving participants time to speak without interruption, using minimal encouragers, and signalling attentiveness through posture, eye contact, and support.

In practice, this also meant that I was sometimes reluctant to probe or ask follow-up questions, particularly when participants appeared hesitant, embarrassed, or concerned about how their peers might perceive their contributions. My intention was to avoid placing pressure on young people or steering them toward topics they were uncomfortable with, especially given the sensitive nature of SRE topics. However, this ethically-motivated caution meant that some responses remained relatively brief or were not developed as fully as they might have been in a more directive interview style. This limitation is not always visible in the data, partly because most sessions were not audio-recorded and I was facilitating while typing contributions in real time. This reduced opportunities to seek clarification or explore emerging ideas without disrupting the flow or emotional safety of the group. As a result, my active listening practice and my reluctance to probe shaped the depth and detail of the data, reflecting a deliberate ethical choice but also a methodological constraint.

Another limitation relates to the use of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). Although selected for its flexibility and alignment with participatory research, RTA is

inherently subjective and shaped by the researcher's interpretive lens (Denzin and Lincoln 2011; Creswell 2014). To address this, I incorporated participant checking and maintained reflexivity through a research journal, positionality reviews, and ongoing critical reflection. Participant discomfort, particularly around sensitive topics such as pleasure and desire (see Chapter Six), also constrained the data and may have limited the depth and openness of some responses.

Finally, many participants felt uncomfortable having their voices recorded. As a result, most contributions were typed in real time rather than audio recorded. While this respected their preferences and maintained ethical integrity, it limited the capture of interactional nuances such as tone, emphasis, hesitation, and spontaneous expressions that may have enriched the analysis. In future RSE studies, alternative approaches could be explored to balance comfort with richer data capture. These might include private online questionnaires or creative digital methods, such as video or voice recordings that anonymise the speaker by altering their appearance or voice tone. Such tools can preserve important expressive qualities (e.g. energy, emotion and rhythm) while maintaining anonymity, potentially reducing embarrassment and encouraging more open reflection on sensitive topics such as sex, pleasure, and relationships. These options could also increase participation by providing young people with a more autonomous and personally comfortable way to share their views.

Overall, my dual role required continuous reflexivity. I remained aware of how my professional background, values, and relationships with participants could influence the research process. I documented decisions and reflections in a research journal and engaged in regular supervision to challenge assumptions and support transparency in interpretation. By adapting my approach in response to participant feedback, I aimed to uphold ethical practice and ensure that young people's voices were represented as authentically as possible.

7.5 Strengthening inclusive and participatory SRE: Recommendations for research, practice and policy in Wales

Based on the findings, the following recommendations aim to inform local policy and practice within NPT and contribute to broader discussions on the ongoing development and implementation of RSE within Wales, particularly in relation to the Curriculum for Wales. The implications are situated within the Welsh Government's RSE Code (2022a), which establishes a rights-based, inclusive framework for RSE and underpins national expectations for learner-centred, developmentally appropriate practice. This includes ongoing Welsh Government work on refining RSE content, strengthening professional learning expectations, and developing guidance to support trans, non-binary and gender-questioning learners, supported by wider commitments in the LGBTQ+ Action Plan (Welsh Government 2026) and the accompanying Glossary of Terms (Welsh Government 2023). These recommendations therefore aim to support local authorities, educators and practitioners in Wales to strengthen SRE/RSE provision through youth participation, sustained professional learning and inclusive whole-school practice.

Future research in NPT should engage a broader demographic of young people to enhance the inclusivity and representativeness of findings. Expanding participation would ensure that diverse experiences inform local practice. As the fieldwork took place prior to the introduction of the new curriculum in 2022, further evaluation is needed to understand how RSE is now being delivered and to what extent it meets young people's needs. Extending this research nationally would offer a clearer picture of variation across Wales, highlighting differences between schools and local authorities, and assessing whether young people's rights and needs are being consistently addressed. Such work would directly support youth-informed policy development and promote equitable, evidence-based approaches to RSE provision.

NPT local authority should also prioritise embedding young people's voices in the design and delivery of RSE, moving towards co-production rather than consultation alone. Co-production ensures that content reflects lived experiences and addresses the concerns raised throughout this study (see Chapters Four, Five and Six). Annual consultation and feedback mechanisms within schools would help maintain the relevance and responsiveness of provision. Furthermore,

adopting a whole-school approach, integrating RSE principles across the curriculum, pastoral care, policies, staff training and peer relationships, can counterbalance the risk-focused narratives identified in school and parental messaging. This aligns with the RSE Code's requirement that learners' rights, needs and lived experiences remain central, and that provision is "developmentally appropriate, inclusive and co-constructed with learners" (Welsh Government 2022a, pp. 3-4). However, while the RSE Code establishes clear principles, it offers limited practical guidance on how teachers should interpret or implement these expectations in everyday practice. This highlights the need for local authorities to provide clear, detailed support to help staff operationalise the Code's commitments to rights, inclusion and co-production. Monitoring mechanisms should be introduced to evaluate outcomes such as pupil engagement, emotional wellbeing and the visibility of inclusive representation.

A shift from a risk-based to a rights-informed approach is essential to align SRE with the UNCRC (1989) and the Welsh Government's broader social justice agenda (Welsh Government 2022a). This transition prioritises equity, wellbeing and empowerment over narrow risk-prevention narratives. The study's findings strongly support this direction and align closely with the intentions of the RSE Curriculum Code, which positions RSE as inclusive, holistic and rooted in learners' rights, needs and lived experiences. Rights-based practice is a core principle of the Code, which emphasises that learning about rights and equity "runs through all the strands" (p. 3) and that RSE content "must be inclusive and reflect diversity, including LGBTQ+ lives" (p. 3). The third strand, "Empowerment, safety and respect," further reinforces learners' rights to protection, safety and freedom from harm (p. 11). Young people in this study expressed priorities that align directly with these requirements, including more inclusive content, meaningful LGBTQ+ representation, open discussions of pleasure and emotional intimacy, opportunities to influence their learning, and educators who are confident and non-judgmental. These preferences reflect the Code's emphasis on supporting learners to develop understanding of relationships, rights, equity, sex, gender and sexuality in developmentally appropriate and inclusive ways. In this sense, the findings provide contemporary, youth-led evidence that operationalises the principles of the national RSE framework.

Within this context, schools in NPT should critically review their current RSE provision to identify effective practices already aligned with rights-based, learner-centred principles (Estyn 2017; Welsh Government 2022a), as well as areas where RSE provision continues to reflect outdated, risk-focused models. Strengthening alignment with the RSE Code would support statutory compliance and respond directly to what young people in this study articulated as their needs and rights. This includes LGBTQ+ inclusive content, focus on emotional wellbeing, opportunities for pupil voice, and open conversations about relationships, trust and pleasure, all elements endorsed in the RSE Code and its associated guidance (Estyn 2017; Welsh Government 2021).

There is also an urgent need for comprehensive and sustained professional learning to ensure that educators, including teachers, youth workers and school nurses, feel confident and competent delivering LGBTQ+ inclusive, participatory, rights-based RSE. This echoes existing literature in which young people question teachers' confidence, subject knowledge and preparedness in RSE. Participants in my study expressed similar concerns, often placing greater trust in external agencies or specialist SRE providers, whom they perceived as more knowledgeable and approachable. Embedding regular, meaningful participation mechanisms that actively involve young people in curriculum design and delivery remains essential to keep RSE relevant and grounded in lived experience. Continued research and evaluation will also be necessary to monitor the impact of ongoing reforms and ensure that young people's voices remain central to policy and practice.

Recent developments in statutory guidance and legal rulings highlight the increasingly complex landscape surrounding gender-inclusive RSE. In Wales, this complexity must be understood within a devolved, rights-based policy context that emphasises inclusive, participatory practice. The Welsh Government's LGBTQ+ Action Plan (2026) and the accompanying Glossary of Terms (2023) reinforce consistent, inclusive language across education settings. The draft guidance for supporting trans, non-binary and gender-questioning learners further stresses the need for safe, respectful and rights-affirming school environments. Together,

these developments underline the importance of ensuring that RSE practitioners are confident, knowledgeable and equipped to respond sensitively to diverse learner identities and experiences.

However, this remains a rapidly evolving field. The UK Supreme Court's decision in *For Women Scotland Ltd v The Scottish Ministers* (2025) clarified in Scotland that "sex" in the Equality Act 2010 refers to biological sex. Although not binding in Wales, the ruling contributes to wider uncertainty across the UK regarding gender-inclusive practice. Recent legal challenges, including the Good Law Project's successful case, along with the EHRC's (2025) interim guidance advising schools to proceed cautiously, demonstrate that gender identity policy is contested and subject to change. As a result, RSE practice operates within a shifting legal and policy environment, requiring careful navigation.

In this context, the role of external agencies becomes increasingly important. When appropriately vetted, these organisations can contribute specialist expertise, lived experience and culturally competent support (UNESCO 2018; Sex Education Forum 2021; Brook 2021). However, identifying suitable providers represents a substantial responsibility for schools and requires robust safeguarding processes and adequate training so staff can recognise when specialist input is needed. Schools must also ensure that external contributions align with statutory guidance and safeguarding expectations.

To navigate this evolving landscape, strengthened professional learning is essential so educators feel confident facilitating inclusive, participatory RSE. The Welsh Government's Expert Panel on RSE highlighted the need for sustained investment in professional learning (Welsh Government 2021), now being progressed through Spectrum's three-year national contract to support schools. Embedding youth voice in curriculum development remains equally vital to ensure that RSE reflects the realities of young people's lives. As reforms continue, ongoing evaluation will be key to understanding their impact, identifying areas for refinement, and maintaining young people's central role in shaping RSE policy and practice. Together, these steps will help ensure that RSE remains

responsive, inclusive and aligned with the needs and rights consistently articulated by young people.

7.5.1 Contribution to local practice and policy

The study's findings were presented to relevant education and health professionals (e.g. teachers, youth workers, and school nurses), at the NPT Children and Young People's RSE Group, ensuring that senior RSE leaders in were fully informed and able to act upon the recommendations put forward by participants in this study. This enabled practitioners involved in RSE provision to reflect on their current approaches and consider changes grounded directly in young people's expressed views and priorities. All young people who participated in the study were also updated on the findings, supporting them to advocate on behalf of their peers and draw upon their own recommendations to influence RSE provision within their communities. These contributions were positively received by practitioners, who described the insights as timely, relevant, and valuable in helping them strengthen their pedagogy and content in ways that better reflect young people's lived experiences. Young people also welcomed the opportunity to see how their input had shaped professional thinking, which strengthened their sense of agency in ongoing local RSE conversations.

In addition, the participatory design and creative methods developed through this research have been incorporated into local RSE training delivered by NPT Youth Service. These sessions encouraged practitioners to adopt more inclusive, youth-informed practices and to reflect critically on issues raised by young people, including emotional intimacy, trust, communication, and pleasure. Through this process, the study has contributed directly to enhancing professional learning, strengthening rights-based, empathetic practice, and promoting the value of co-production as a meaningful approach to RSE design and delivery.

7.6 Conclusion

This study supports the idea that young people continue to raise longstanding concerns about SRE, including the lack of inclusive content, limited opportunities

for meaningful participation, and emotionally safe learning environments. Despite policy reforms and evolving societal attitudes, the lived experiences of young people in schools suggest that SRE remains largely adult-led, risk-focused, and disconnected from their realities. These findings reflect the rights-based, participatory and relational framework guiding the study and reinforce the central argument of the thesis: that young people's voice and agency are essential to the design, delivery and evaluation of meaningful, rights-based SRE. This study has demonstrated that youth voice has not been meaningfully maintained since the introduction of the 2014 SRE programme in NPT. Participants reported limited opportunities to influence SRE lesson content or delivery, and there was no evidence of sustained youth participation measures, programmes, or resources developed by young people being implemented in schools in relation to SRE.

When given space to participate, young people demonstrate that they are experts in their own lives. Their insights challenge educators, policymakers, and practitioners to reimagine SRE not just for young people, but with them. This shift is essential to ensure SRE becomes a collaborative, inclusive, and empowering educational experience. By foregrounding youth voice through participatory, creative methods, this research contributes a timely, context-specific perspective to the field. It calls for a rights-informed, pleasure-inclusive, and co-produced approach to SRE that moves beyond tokenism and genuinely reflects young people's needs and aspirations. These findings also highlight ongoing tensions between young people's rights, voice and agency, where opportunities to express views or participate did not always translate into meaningful influence over SRE provision. Moreover, these dynamics were shaped by power relations and varying levels of psychological safety, which influenced how young people engaged and how their contributions were recognised.

7.7 Personal reflection on the research journey

Looking back, this project has been both a personal and professional learning journey as well as an opportunity to contribute new knowledge to SRE in NPT and beyond. With a background in quantitative research, this was my first substantial engagement with qualitative inquiry, and it required a significant shift in mindset

and methodological approach. Although challenging, the process deepened my understanding of the complex realities surrounding SRE. As Denzin and Lincoln (2018) argue, qualitative research encourages interpretive and empathetic engagement that extends beyond the limits of quantitative approaches. Lundy's (2007) participation model, emphasising space, voice, audience, and influence, also guided my efforts to ensure that young people's contributions were genuinely heard and meaningfully incorporated into the study.

A key lesson was the importance of truly listening to participants and remaining flexible. Staying curious and open enabled me to adapt the research design to participants' needs, particularly during co-production phases such as the youth advisory and pilot sessions, where power dynamics and ethical considerations required ongoing reflection. Unforeseen challenges, such as participants choosing not to be audio recorded, prompted me to question my assumptions and adjust my approach. These moments strengthened the study's reliability and reinforced the need for ethical, inclusive practice. Groundwater-Smith et al. (2014) highlight the value of ethical reflexivity in participatory research, a principle that guided these decisions. Engaging closely with participants and analysing their narratives also helped me develop more advanced qualitative skills and a deeper appreciation of the cultural and emotional complexities shaping their SRE experiences.

Although this study has methodological limitations, the co-production processes developed, particularly the youth advisory work, iterative feedback cycles, and participatory shaping of content, offer a practical framework that schools could adapt when co-creating curriculum materials with young people. While not designed as a school-based study, the depth of engagement achieved demonstrates how young people can meaningfully shape SRE when given structured opportunities, support, and influence. In this way, the approach developed here provides a useful model for practice, illustrating what is possible when participation is embedded thoughtfully and ethically.

This research has strengthened my methodological skills and deepened my commitment to youth voice and agency in education. Centring young people's

lived experiences highlighted the value of inclusive, responsive, and participatory approaches (Allen 2005b). Co-producing the study and navigating its ethical complexities further reinforced the importance of reflexivity, adaptability, and cultural sensitivity, not just as academic concepts, but as core values shaping my professional practice. Engaging with the wider academic community also underscored the role of reflexive and collaborative inquiry in producing research that is both rigorous and socially meaningful. These principles have guided the development of this study and contributed to my evolving professional identity (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009). As a result, my commitment to youth-informed SRE practice has deepened, and I remain dedicated to advancing inclusive approaches beyond this research.

This research makes a unique contribution by foregrounding young people's lived experiences of SRE in NPT through a practitioner-led, qualitative approach. Co-produced with young people and guided by Lundy's (2007) model participation model, the research shows how youth voice can shape educational research and practice. Methodologically, the research navigates ethical challenges with reflexivity; practically, it advances inclusive, youth-informed SRE aligned with Allen's (2005) participatory principles. Ultimately, it demonstrates how practitioner inquiry can transform both professional identity and educational systems to better empower young people. It aligns with other practitioner-led, youth-informed sexuality education projects that prioritise ethical reflexivity, co-production and inclusive practice. Renold's AGENDA project (2016, 2023) and McGeeney's Good Sex project (2014b) demonstrate how creative, participatory methods and practitioner inquiry can transform SRE design, pedagogy and professional identity. These examples reinforce my commitment to advancing inclusive, youth-informed SRE beyond this study. Finally, as an SRE practitioner, I was pleased that participants felt safe enough to share their experiences. However, I was also disappointed that they had not had opportunities to address their SRE needs over the past four years. As one participant CJ stated, "I hope other young people will benefit from our involvement in your research" (School B-G3.TV).

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Appendix A: My Professional Timeline in NPT

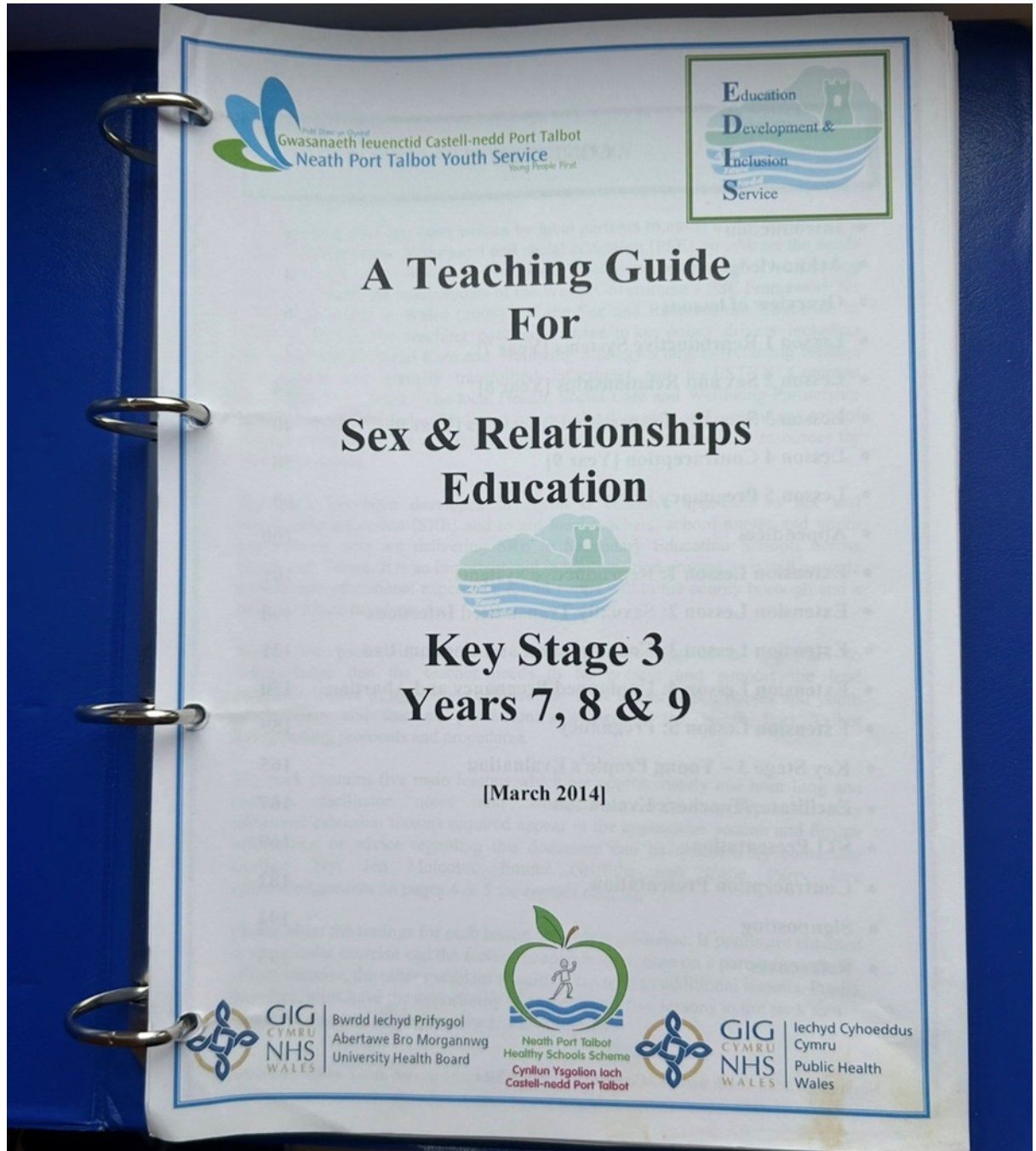
Year	Role	Organisation
2000-2004:	Youth and Community Practitioner	NPTLAYS
2001-2025:	RADS Manager	NPTLAYS
2004-2008:	Sexual Health Service Improvement Manager	NPTPHT
	RADS Manager	
2008 -2025:	Senior Youth and Community Officer	NPTLAYS
	RADS Manager	

Note on the above organisation acronyms used:

Neath Port Talbot Local Authority Youth Service (**NPTLAYS**)

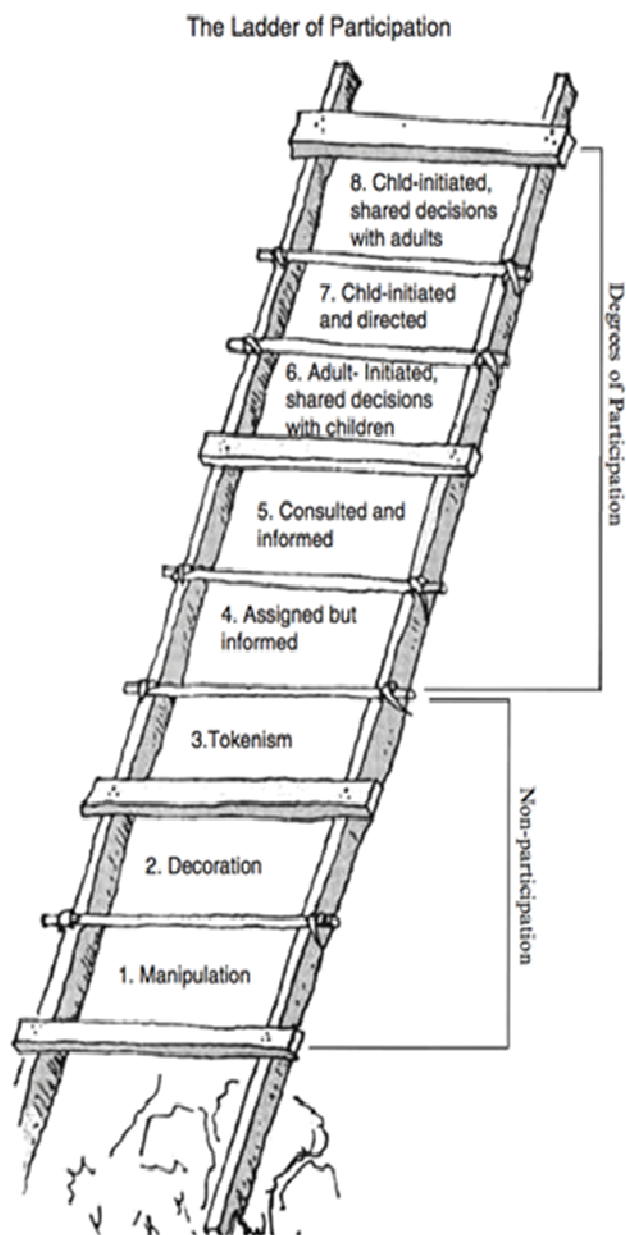
Neath Port Talbot Public Health Team (**NPTPHT**)

**Appendix B: NPT – A Teaching Guide for SRE Key Stage 3 Years 7, 8 & 9
(March 2014)**



For further information about this SRE Teaching Guide, including access to the full resource, please contacting the Neath Port Talbot Education Department

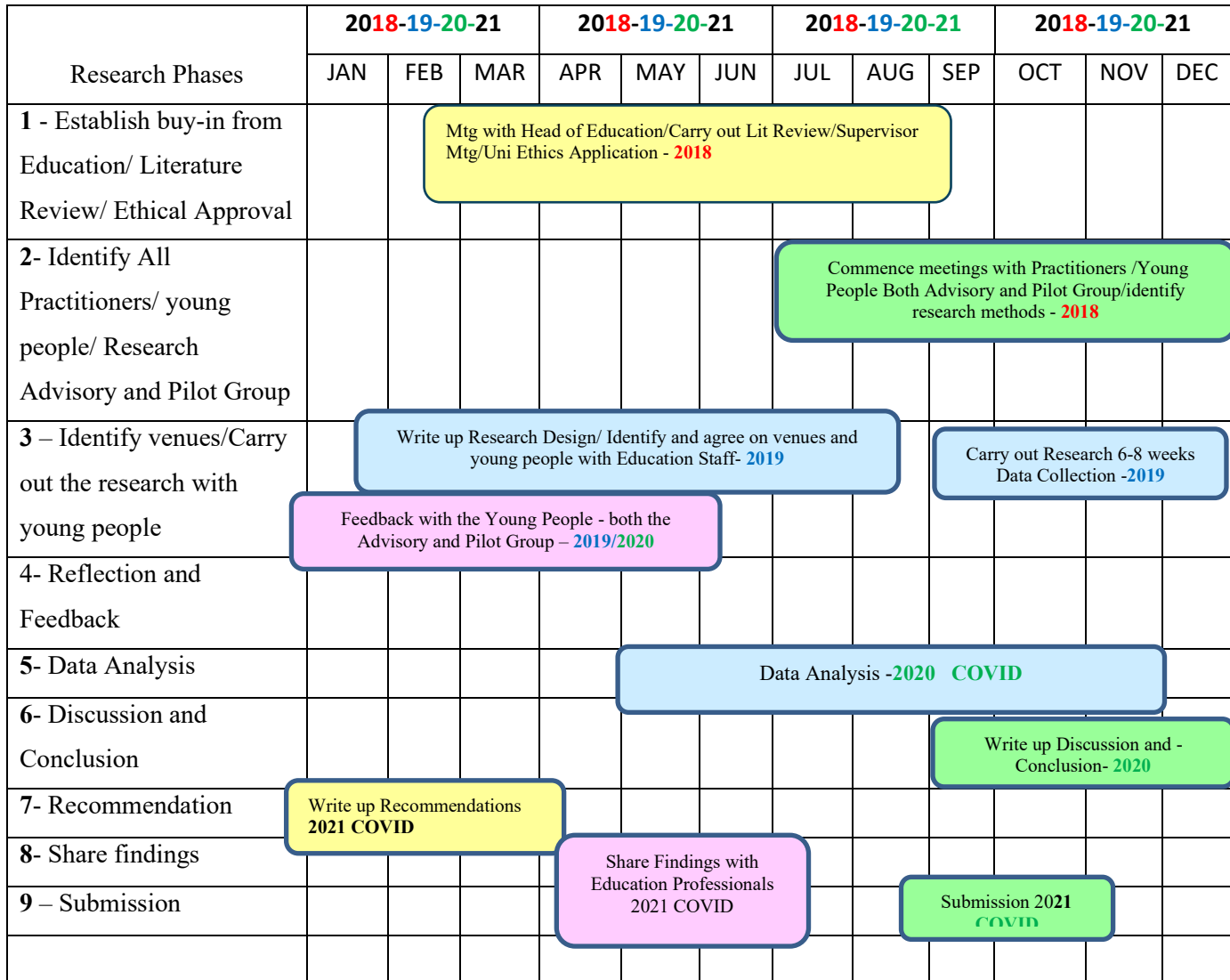
Appendix C: Roger Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation



Roger Hart's original 1992 illustration of the Ladder of Children's Participation from *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*. The model features eight "rungs" that describe the characteristics associated with different levels of decision-making agency, control, or power that can be given to children and youth by adults.

Appendix D: GANTT Chart (Example)

Research Phase and Timeline Management Proposal



Please note:

The above is one example of a GANTT chart I used during my research project. Unfortunately, Covid delayed my initial research phase and timeline management proposal, therefore adjustments were made as and when necessary, throughout my research project until its completion.

Appendix E: Draft Young People/Participant Information/Consent Forms

Sex and Relationship Education Research Project [Project Leader Corinne Fry]
Voice and Agency: Co-producing and conducting a research and engagement project with young people on Sex and Relationship Education in one Local Authority in Wales.



Young Peoples Participants Consent form

- I have been given information about the project, had time to read the information and to ask Corinne the project leader questions about my involvement.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the project at any time without giving a reason.
- I know the project will take place on my school premises, what the project involves and how long it will take.
- I am aware that all information given by me will be held in the strictest of confidence and give my consent to allow any information I provide to be used as part of a published report or presentation. I have also been told that any information used in this way will not identify me or others involved in the project in person.
- I understand the purpose of the project and give consent to have what I say audio recorded. [I would also like Corinne to check with me on each occasion so that I can say its ok]
- I have been informed that if Corinne is made aware of any information that highlights a risk to myself, the school child's protection/safeguarding procedures will be followed to ensure I receive appropriate support.

Person Giving Consent

Name_____ Signature_____ Date_____

Person Taking Consent

Name_____ Signature_____ Date-_____

Appendix F: Draft Parent Information/Consent Forms

Sex and Relationship Education Research Project [Project Leader Corinne Fry]

Voice and Agency: Co-producing and conducting a research and engagement project with young people on Sex and Relationship Education in one Local Authority in Wales.



Parent Consent form

- I have been given information about the project; know it will take place on the school premises, what the project involves and how long it will take.
- I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw them from the project at any time without giving a reason.
- I have been informed that I can contact the research project leader about my child's participation in the project at any time and been given Corinne's contact details.
- I am aware that all information given by my child will be held in the strictest of confidence and give my consent to allow any information they provide to be used as part of a published report or presentation. I have also been told that any information used in this way will not identify my child or other participants involved in the project in person.
- I understand the purpose of the project and give consent to have what my child says audio recorded. [I would also like Corinne to check with my child on each of the three occasions so that they can say its ok]
- I have been informed that if Corinne is made aware of any information that highlights a risk to my child, the school child's protection/safeguarding procedures will be followed to ensure they receive appropriate support.

Parent Giving Consent Name _____ Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix G (Front Cover): Agreed Young People/Participant Consent Form



Appendix H (Back): Agreed Young People/Participant Consent Form Information and Consent Slip

Young People's Participant Consent Form

- I have been given information about the project, had time to read the information and to ask Corinne the project leader questions about my involvement.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the project at any time without giving a reason.
- I know the project will take place on my school premises, what the project involves and how long it will take.
- I am aware that all information given by me will be held in the strictest of confidence and give my consent to allow any information I provide to be used as part of a published report or presentation. I have also been told that any information used in this way will not identify me or others involved in the project in person.
- I understand the purpose of the project and give consent to have what I say audio recorded. (I would also like Corinne to check with me on each occasion so that I can say its ok)
- I have been informed that if Corinne is made aware of any information that highlights a risk to myself, the school child's protection/safeguarding procedures will be followed to ensure I receive appropriate support.

Person Giving Consent

Name _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Person Taking Consent

Name _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Research Project Information for Young People:

Before you take part in this research project it is important to understand why it is being done and what it will involve for you. So please read and consider this leaflet carefully.

What is the project about?

Corinne Fry is undertaking this research study towards part of the requirements for her Professional Doctorate Research Project (PhD) at Cardiff University and your involvement in it is purely voluntary and much appreciated. Second, and most importantly, it aims to consult with young people in secondary education about their views on sex and relationships education (SRE). This is important because it will enable education and health professionals to make sure we are meeting young people's needs regarding SRE in the future. It cannot promise that this research will help you individually, but the information we obtain from you could help other young people in your schools in the future.

Why I have been chosen to take part in the project?

Only three schools have been invited to take part in the project and young people in each of the schools will be selected by the teacher leading on SRE in your school to ensure diversity.

Do I have to take part and can I change my mind?

No, you do not have to take part, it is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw from the research project at any time without giving a reason. If you do decide to stop, this will not affect you in any way.

How will I be able to take part and what will I have to do?

You will be working with myself Corinne Fry along with other young people in your school (maximum of 12 young people). It will start in November and finish in December and you will participate in up to 3 workshops (from 1-1pm). The workshops will take place in your school and you will be given the opportunity to discuss the research questions and share your views on SRE with your peers. Refreshments and/or lunch will be provided for each workshop you attend. With your permission I would like you to agree to information provided by yourself to be recorded during the workshop, this could be audio-recorded and or ~~noted~~ by myself during the workshops. Any data collected will be anonymised and you will not be identified in any reports I write up. You will be given a consent form to sign prior to taking part which you will be able to keep one copy for yourself. It is only the three workshops and you will not be required to do anything else for this research.

Is the information I give confidential?

Yes All information you give will remain confidential and you or any other young person taking part in the project will not be identified in any research findings, published report or presentations.

Child Protection and Safeguarding - how we keep you safe during the project?

Your well-being in this project is important and if you would like to talk about an issue that you are concerned about that you feel puts you at risk I will make sure the school child's protection/safeguarding procedures are followed and ensure you receive appropriate support.

Who will have access to the final research projects findings?

The local Education and Health teams will have access to this research project findings/results and a copy will also be sent to Cardiff University for an assessment as part of the requirements for my Professional Doctorate Research Project undertaken by the research project leader myself Corinne Fry.

Who will have approved the research study?

This study will be reviewed by Cardiff University School Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for your time and assistance with this research project. If you would like to speak to me about your involvement please contact me on - 07760949099
Corinne Fry - Project leader

* Please return both yours and your parent consent form to your school by _____ *

Young People's Participant Consent Form

- I have been given information about the project, had time to read the information and to ask Corinne the project leader questions about my involvement.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the project at any time without giving a reason.
- I know the project will take place on my school premises, what the project involves and how long it will take.
- I am aware that all information given by me will be held in the strictest of confidence and give my consent to allow any information I provide to be used as part of a published report or presentation. I have also been told that any information used in this way will not identify me or others involved in the project in person.
- I understand the purpose of the project and give consent to have what I say audio recorded. (I would also like Corinne to check with me on each occasion so that I can say its ok)
- I have been informed that if Corinne is made aware of any information that highlights a risk to myself, the school child's protection/safeguarding procedures will be followed to ensure I receive appropriate support.

Person Giving Consent

Name _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Person Taking Consent

Name _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Appendix I: Agreed Parent Information and Consent Form

Parental Consent Form	Research Project Information for Parents:	Parental Consent Form
- I have been given information about the project, know it will take place on the school premises, what the project involves and how long it will take. - I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw them from the project at any time without giving a reason. - I have been informed that I can contact the research project leader about my child's participation in the project at any time and been given Corinne's contact details. - I am aware that all information given by my child will be held in the strictest of confidence and give my consent to allow any information they provide to be used as part of a published report or presentation. I have also been told that any information used in this way will not identify my child or others participants involved in the project in person. - I understand the purpose of the project and give consent to have what my child says audio recorded. (I would also like Corinne to check with my child on each occasion so that they can say its ok) - I have been informed that if Corinne is made aware of any information that highlights a risk to my child, the school child's protection/safeguarding procedures will be followed to ensure they receive appropriate support.	Before your child takes part in this research project it is important to understand why it is being done and what involvement they will have. So please read and consider this leaflet carefully. What is the project about? Corinne Fry is undertaking this research study towards part of the requirements for her Professional Doctorate Research Project (PhD) at Cardiff University and your child's involvement in it is purely voluntary and much appreciated. Second, and most importantly, it aims to consult with young people in secondary education about their views on sex and relationships education (SRE). This is important because it will enable education and health professionals to make sure we are meeting young people's needs regarding SRE in the future. I cannot promise that this research will help you child individually, but the information we obtain from them could help other young people in your schools in NPT in the future. Why I have my child been chosen to take part in the project? Only three schools have been invited to take part in the project and young people in each of the schools will be selected by the teacher leading on SRE in your school to ensure diversity. Do my child have to take part and can they change their mind? No, they do not have to take part, it is entirely voluntary and they can withdraw from the research project at any time without giving a reason. If they do decide to stop, this will not affect them in any way. How will my child be able to take part and what will they have to do? They will be working with myself Corinne Fry along with other young people in their school (maximum of 12 young people). It will start in November and finish in December and they will participate in up to 3 workshops (from 1-3pm). The workshops will take place in their school and they will be given the opportunity to discuss the research questions and share their views on SRE with their peers. Refreshments and or lunch will be provided for each workshop they attend. With your permission I would like you to agree to information provided by your child to be recorded during the workshops, this could be audio-recorded and or notetaking by myself during the workshops. Any data collected will be anonymised and your child will not be identified in any reports I write up. Your child will be given a consent form to sign prior to taking part which they will be able to keep one copy for themselves. It is only the three workshops and they will not be required to do anything else for this research. Is the information my child provides confidential? Yes. All information provided by your child will remain confidential and they or any other young person taking part in the project will not be identified in any research findings, published report or presentations. Child Protection and Safeguarding – how we keep you child safe during the project? Your child's well-being in this project is important and if they would like to talk about an issue that they are concerned about, that they feel puts them at risk, I will make sure the school child's protection/safeguarding procedures are followed and ensure they receive appropriate support. Who will have access to the final research projects findings? The local Education and Health teams will have access to this research project findings/results and a copy will also be sent to Cardiff University for an assessment as part of the requirements for my Professional Doctorate Research Project undertaken by the research project leader myself Corinne Fry. How will the research study be reviewed? This study will be reviewed by Cardiff University School Research Ethics Committee Thank you for your time and assistance with this research project. If you would like to speak to me about your child's involvement at any time please contact me on - 07855430959 Corinne Fry - Project Leader * Please return your parent consent form to your child's school by _____ *	- I have been given information about the project, know it will take place on the school premises, what the project involves and how long it will take. - I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw them from the project at any time without giving a reason. - I have been informed that I can contact the research project leader about my child's participation in the project at any time and been given Corinne's contact details. - I am aware that all information given by my child will be held in the strictest of confidence and give my consent to allow any information they provide to be used as part of a published report or presentation. I have also been told that any information used in this way will not identify my child or others participants involved in the project in person. - I understand the purpose of the project and give consent to have what my child says audio recorded. (I would also like Corinne to check with my child on each occasion so that they can say its ok) - I have been informed that if Corinne is made aware of any information that highlights a risk to my child, the school child's protection/safeguarding procedures will be followed to ensure they receive appropriate support.
Parent Giving Consent Name _____ Signature _____ Date _____		Parent Giving Consent Name _____ Signature _____ Date _____

**Appendix J: Folding Heart Front Cover for both Participants/Parents'
Consent Forms Designed by the Youth Advisory Group**

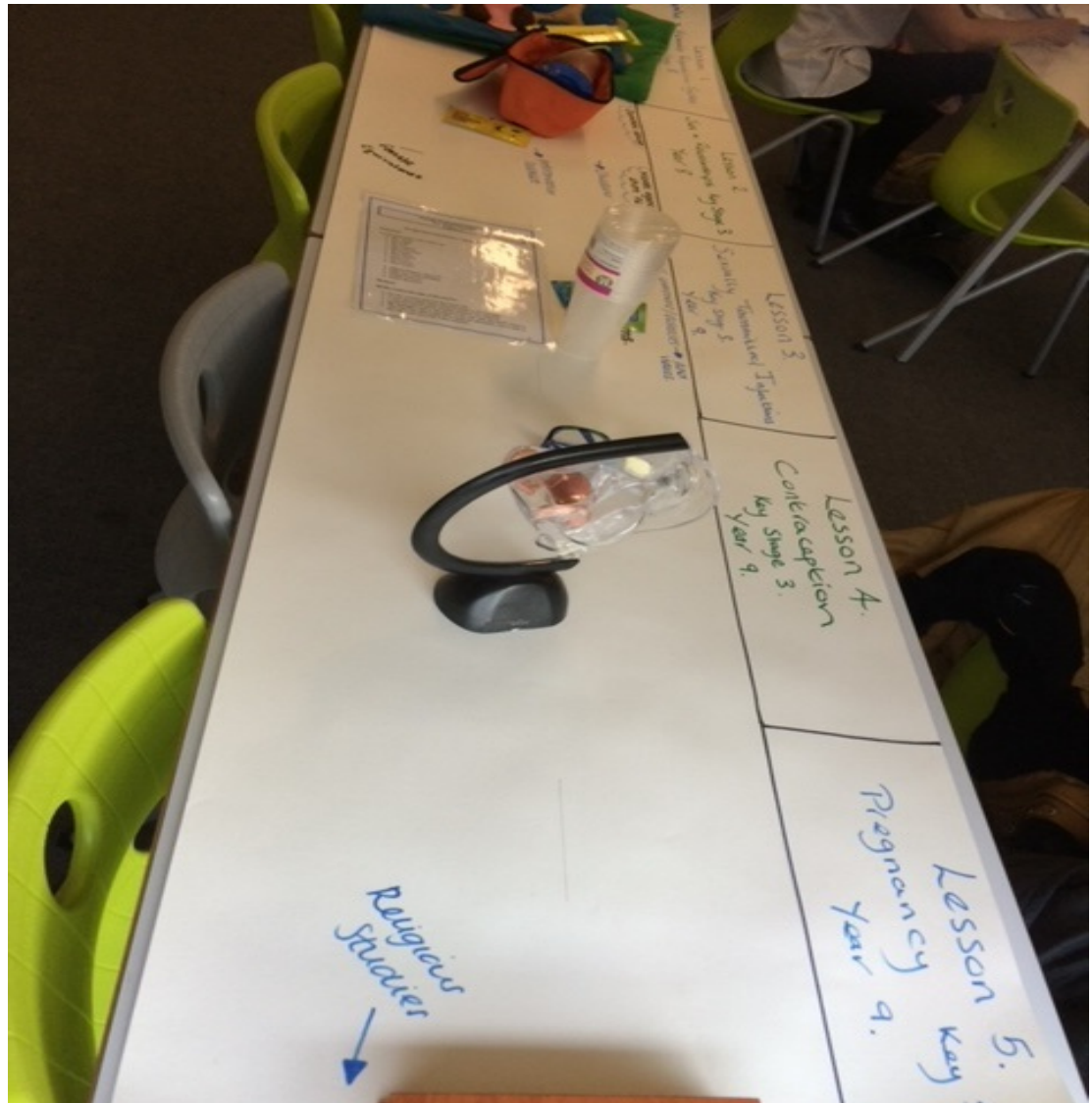


Appendix K: Workshop/Station Four: Example of participants' recollections of SRE lessons (School A-G1, and 2)

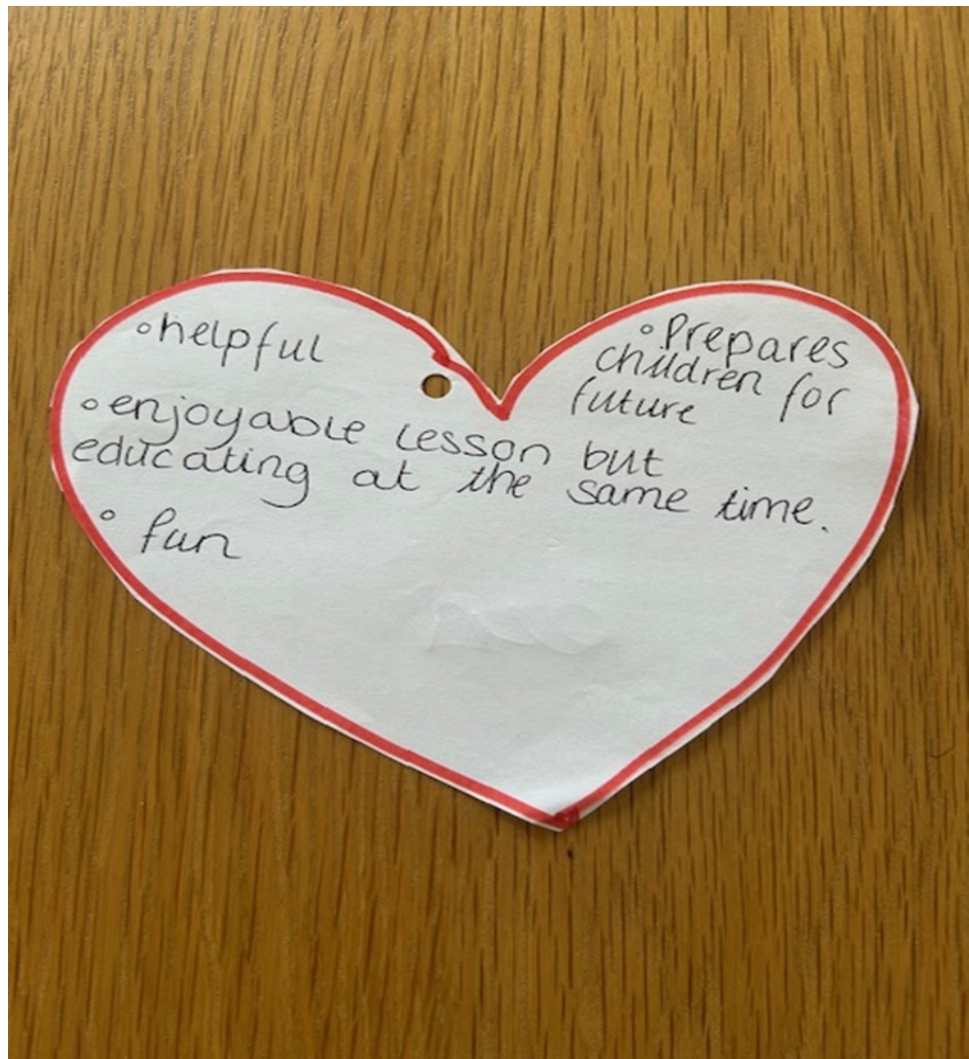


[illegible]

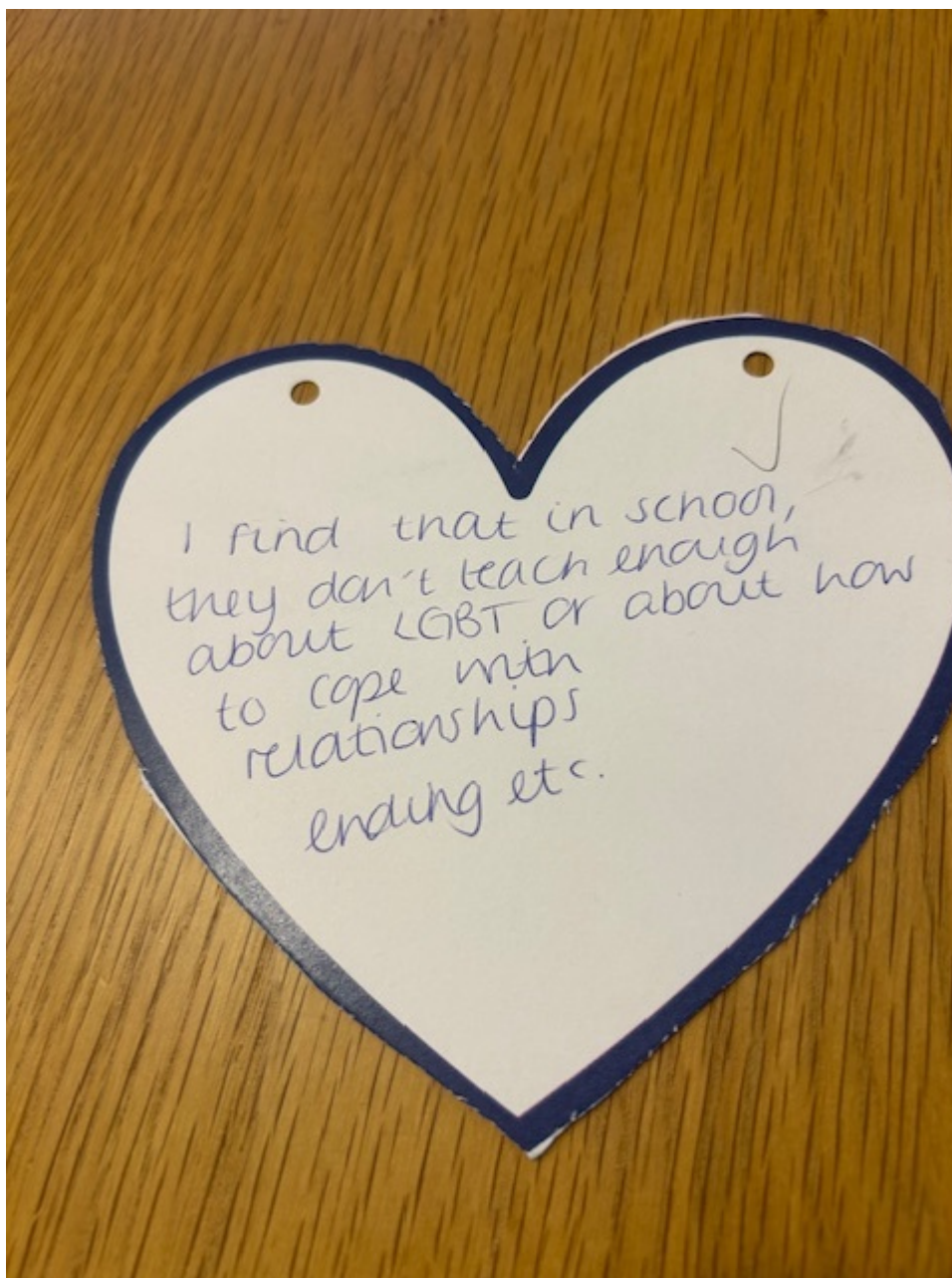
Appendix M: Workshop/Station Four: Example of participants' recollections of SRE lessons (School C-G5)



**Appendix N: Workshop/Station Five: Example of participants' positive views
of SRE lessons (School A-G1)**



Appendix O: Workshop/Station Five: Example of participants' negative views of SRE lessons (School B-G2)



Appendix P: Participants-School/Group-Pseudonym/Gender-Identity

Key: School - Groups - Number of Participants - Gender

School A: Group 1 (3M -1TM -1F) Group 2 (2M - 1TF – 2F)

School B; Group 3 (4M – 3F) Group 4 (2M – 1NB– 4F)

School C: Group 5 (1M – 2F)

School Setting	Number of Participants/Group	Pseudonym Gender-Identity
School A	1 Group 1	Lilly/ F
	2 Group 1	Rhydian/ M
	3 Group 1	Rhys/M
	4 Group 1	Tom/M
	5 Group 1	Sam/TM (Trans Male)
	6 Group 2	Phoebe/F
	7 Group 2	Angharad/F
	8 Group 2	Zen/TF (Trans Female)
	9 Group 2	Darcy/M
	10 Group 2	Rhodri/M
School B	11 Group 3	Stacey/F
	12 Group 3	Jo/F
	13 Group 3	Annabelle/F
	14 Group 3	Owen/M
	15 Group 3	Daf /M
	16 Group 3	Ed/M
	17 Group 3	Jay /M
	18 Group 4	Kate/F
	19 Group 4	CJ/NB (Non-Binary)
	20 Group 4	Sadie/F
	21 Group 4	Nieve/F
	22 Group 4	Jenna/F
	23 Group 4	Ben/M
	24 Group 4	James/M
School C	25 Group 5	Charlie/M
	26 Group 5	Cerys/F
	27 Group 5	Beth/F

Appendix Q: Evidence of Ethical Application and Approval

From: socii-ethics [<mailto:socsi-ethics@cardiff.ac.uk>]

Sent: 08 August 2018 15:27

To: Corinne Fry <c.fry@npt.gov.uk>

Subject: RE: Ethics Form Submission for Corinne Fry Student Number:C1569440

Dear Corinne,

Your application has now been reviewed and approved by the Chair of SREC. Please therefore find attached your letter of ethical approval.

Thanks,

Jeni