‘God, you can’t teach sex education in a Catholic school’: Exploring the lived experiences of statutory Relationships and Sex Education for young women in English Catholic schools from a feminist perspective.



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Abstract

Like all English secondary schools, faith schools have been required to adhere to the statutory RSE guidance since 2021. However, the guidance includes the stipulation that faith schools are permitted to deliver mandatory content from a 'distinctive faith perspective' (Department for Education, 2019a). Historically, sex education in England has been shown to uphold potentially harmful discourses of gender and sexuality, which in turn, shape societal understandings and experiences of girlhood. The delivery of statutory RSE from distinct faith perspectives sees secular sex education narratives intersecting with theological sexual values, the impact of which on young women is yet to be explored. The Catholic Church has historically upheld stringent sexual ethics which prohibit same-sex relationships, contraception, and pre-marital sex, and has in recent years explicitly contested progressive sex education agendas (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2019). In turn, the ability of Catholic schools to deliver RSE that adequately meets and reflects the needs of young women in relation to sexuality and relationships emerges as a pertinent question.

This thesis employs a feminist, qualitative methodology to explore the lived experiences of young women (n=11) and their teachers (n=3) in relation to statutory RSE provision across two Catholic secondary schools in England. This research employed semi-structured focus groups and interviews, combined with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to yield rich insight into the implementation and impact of Catholic RSE. Findings demonstrated that the teachers' experiences of intersecting Catholic values with statutory requirements were shaped by their broader lived experiences and identity in relation to faith, sexuality and relationships, and teaching. The young women reported facing complex socio-sexual landscapes, yet their needs and lived-experiences were seldom addressed adequately within RSE provision. Across both schools, the participants reported often feeling disengaged, alienated and frustrated with RSE content. Issues in RSE engagement were not solely tied to the Catholic lens adopted in both schools, however, the teaching of Catholic sexual ethics was seen to compound failings in content relevance and attainability.

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Key Abbreviations

Table 1: Key Abbreviations and Acronyms

RSE	Relationships and Sex Education (Department for Education, 2019a)
SRE	Sex and Relationships Education (Department for Education and Employment, 2000)
RE	Religious Education
DfE	Department for Education
CES	Catholic Education Service
PSHE	Physical, Social, Health and Economic education
KS3/KS4	The English National Curriculum is divided into several 'key stages', which comprise of multiple school years – ranging from 'early years' to 'key stage 5'. Children are assessed at the end of each key stage. Key stage 3 covers Years 7 to 9 (secondary), and key stage 4, years 10 to 11 (UK Government, *The National Curriculum,* n.d.)
LGBTQ+	Encompasses those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and anyone who identifies as something outside of cisgender and/or heterosexual (Stonewall, 2020).
ITE	Initial Teacher Education – university led training undertaken by those who wish to become qualified teachers in England.
GBV	Gender-based violence
VAWG	Violence against women and girls

Key Terms

Table 2: Key Term Definitions

Gender	Throughout this thesis, I use the term 'gender' to describe socially constructed norms, expectations, behaviours, discourses and social hierarchies relating to masculinity and femininity (World Health Organisation, Gender, n.d.). This is often conflated with sex assigned at birth (Stonewall, n.d.), however, I understand gender identity (i.e. how individuals identify in relation to womanhood/manhood) and expression to be distinct from biological sex characteristics and self-determined. This work is explicitly underpinned by acceptance of and desire for liberation for trans and gender non-conforming people, who face increasing hostility and discrimination within English society (Marshall, 2024).
Girlhood	I broadly adopt Driscoll's (2003) definition of girlhood as 'feminine adolescence', but it also can refer to experiences and expectations of femininity during childhood. Following my understanding of gender as socially produced, girlhood is predominantly experienced by those who self-identify as girls, but it's associated expectations can also be imposed on those who do not identify as such.
Sexuality	Sexuality broadly is used to refer to an individual's capacity for sexual desire, feelings, attraction, and expression. However, it is also often used to refer to sexual orientation.
Homophobia	'The fear or dislike of someone, based on prejudice or negative attitudes, beliefs or views about lesbian, gay or bi people.' (Stonewall, n.d.).
Discourse	Adopting a Foucauldian definition of discourse(s), this term refers to 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 2002 p. 208). In lay terms, discourse describes the ways we 'talk' about things and/or people within society (through text, speech, documents, behaviours, attitudes), and how this influences how we understand and enact those things.
Religion	Religion is used to primarily refer to organised religion (i.e. faith that is collectively organised – e.g. Christianity, Islam, Judaism), however, I also use the term to refer to individual faith identities (e.g. whether someone believes in God or other theological teachings).

Chapter One: Introduction

'we should talk about it, like talk about safe sex and stuff? Because it's inevitable' (Sasha)

1.1 Introduction

This thesis explores the lived experiences of statutory Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in Catholic secondary schools. Whilst RSE became a statutory requirement for all English secondary schools in 2021 (Long, 2023), Catholic schools occupy a unique position within education policy that has enabled RSE to be delivered from distinctly religious perspectives. Sex education is argued to be an important area of 'discursive politics', in that it determines how we understand, feel about, and enact sexuality and gender (Irvine, 2004, p.10). This research specifically focuses on the experiences of young women ages 13-14 (n=11) and their teachers (n=3) as feminist research has demonstrated the role of sex education and health policy in both producing and maintaining potentially harmful discourses of girlhood and sexuality (Fine, 1992; Thompson, 1990; Tolman, 1994). The delivery of RSE content through a Catholic theological lens and pedagogy presents a distinctive site of discursive politics in that it offers a meeting point of normative narratives surrounding adolescence, gender, sexuality, and Catholic sexual ethics. The specific impact of this intersection on young women's experiences of RSE, and subsequent understandings of their own identity and sexuality is yet to be substantively explored. As such, this thesis offers a rich, phenomenological study of the experiences of eleven young women, and their teachers, in relation to the delivery of statutory RSE content in Catholic settings.

1.1a Personal Motivation for Research

Throughout completing this thesis, discussions of my subject choice have often been met with the same question – '*so did you go to Catholic school'?'.* My response, that I did not, and I am not Catholic, has been a source of confusion for some people. My attraction to this topic is rooted not in lived experience, but rather fascination and awe at the enduring scale

of influence religion holds over the ways human sexuality is related to and enacted. As such, I approach this topic from a distinctly 'outsider' positionality (Holmes, 2020; MacRae, 2007). My interest in this subject initially developed during my undergraduate degree in Philosophy, Religion and Ethics. Through studying the sociology of religion, feminist philosophies, sexual ethics, and feminist theology, I developed a profound interest in the ways in which faith has shaped societal and individual relationships to sex. My undergraduate dissertation focused on Christian women's relationship to sexual pleasure and involved a digital ethnographic study of Christian marital advice forums. The personal accounts of women navigating the complexities of their faith and sexuality, often imbued with shame, anxiety, disappointment, but also at times, joy and freedom, stayed with me. For many of those who reported fraught relationships between their religious identity and sexual pleasure, one theme emerged – the absence of sex and relationships education. Feminist therapeutic literature, which I also began to engage with during this period, highlighted Catholic sexual ethics – namely the prohibition of sex before marriage, contraception, and LGBTQ+ identities – as significantly contributing to tensions between women's ability to live fulfilling and authentic sexual lives, and their faith (Ogden, 2008; Mahoney, 2008).

Catholic schools are the most commonly represented form of faith secondary school in England – representing 9% of all secondary schools (Long et al, 2024). In 2017, as initial policy discussion began surrounding the introduction of statutory RSE and the mandate for faith schools to deliver this content (Long, 2023), I felt Catholic schools presented a ripe site of investigation for the experiences of young women in relation to broader sex education policy and religious discourses. Catholic schooling has largely remained a 'secret garden' within education research, known only to the 'cognoscenti' (Grace, 2002, p. xi). To the best of my knowledge, this thesis offers the only empirical study, to date, of student and staff experiences of statutory RSE in English Catholic schools. As such, this work offers a unique contribution to sex education research. Furthermore, scant work has specifically addressed English Catholic schooling from a feminist perspective, and the voices and experiences of young women educated in contemporary Catholic contexts remain significantly underexplored within education research. Thus, this work presents an original

methodological and theoretical lens through which the seldom captured experiences of young women attending English Catholic schools can be understood.

1.1b Current Context of RSE

I began work on this research in September 2019, just three months after the statutory RSE guidance was published (Department for Education, 2019a). Over the course of writing this thesis, I have witnessed RSE become a site of increasing hostility and contestation from the political right in England, and watched increasingly fearmongering narratives about its content become mainstream. Whilst relationships and sex education has often represented a 'lightening rod' of controversy and division between progressive and conservative groups (Bialystok and Wright, 2017), the current political climate surrounding RSE in England constitutes a significant threat to the quality and longevity of its delivery going forward. In 2023, a report commissioned by former Conservative MP Miriam Cates and published by the Christian thinktank, the New Social Covenant Unit (NSCU), claimed RSE in England was enabling 'age-inappropriate, extreme, sexualising and inaccurate' material to be taught in schools (Adu and Adams, 2023). Further, it argued that RSE facilitators were 'indoctrinating' children and young people into trans and gender non-conforming identities (NSCU, 2023).

As researchers have highlighted, the NSCU claims appear to be premised on dubious evidence and fail to account for a wealth of findings to the contrary, from work with young people themselves (Setty et al, 2024; King-Hill, Gilsenan and Stander, 2023). The former Conservative government responded by bringing forward a planned review of RSE delivery, which culminated in the publication of draft guidance that significantly seeks to rescind progress made in the quality and remit of English RSE provision (Department for Education, 2024b). The proposed guidance includes the construction of gender identity as a 'contested' subject, and age limits that necessitate the prohibition of key topics (i.e. sexual and domestic violence, pornography, contraception, and STIs) prior to Year 9 (Department for Education, 2024a; 2024b, p.12). Preliminary responses from third-sector organisations and RSE researchers suggest that, if actioned, these changes could significantly impede sexual violence prevention, young peoples' sexual health and wellbeing, and compound the exclusion and prejudice faced by LGBTQ+ people (Emmerson, 2024; Brook, 2024;

Hengstwerth and King-Hill, 2024). At the time of writing, with the newly elected Labour government failing to respond to growing pressure to abandon the proposed changes (Whittaker, 2024; Whannel, 2024), the future quality and content of English RSE remains extremely unclear. Considering this context, it is more important than ever that the voices and experiences of those experiencing and delivering RSE are centred in the policy conversation. As such, this thesis offers a timely and rich insight into young women and their teachers' perceptions of statutory RSE.

1.1c Research Questions, Aims, and Design

In this section, I provide a brief overview of the research questions, overarching aims and research design for the study discussed in this thesis. The principle questions underpinning the present research are as follows:

1. How do Catholic sexual values intersect with statutory RSE requirements in Catholic schools?
2. What are young women's lived experiences of statutory RSE in Catholic schools?
3. Does RSE delivered in Catholic schools reflect and meet the current needs of young women in England?
4. How do the experiences of staff delivering RSE in Catholic schools collude or contrast with young women's experiences?

This thesis aims to explore young women's perceptions and lived experiences of statutory RSE taught through a Catholic lens. I am specifically interested in how broader RSE narratives and content are translated into Catholic theological teaching and pedagogy, and in turn, how this effects young women's engagement and feelings about RSE. A core objective of this research is to assess whether this intersection can adequately meet young women's needs in the 21st century, and how Catholic RSE interacts with their broader experiences of gender, relationships and sexuality in the 'real' world. A secondary objective is to explore how teachers delivering RSE in Catholic schools approach the subject, and whether they perceive statutory policy to be compatible with faith perspectives. Further, it

aims to assess potential gaps between how teachers conceptualise Catholic RSE, and how young women receive it.

The research questions are addressed through an in-depth qualitative study comprised of two focus groups with young women in Year 9 (n=11), and three semi-structured interviews with teachers involved in RSE delivery across two Catholic secondary schools. The data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which advocates for an in-depth focus on a small sample of participants, with a view to yield rich insight into the lived experiences of these two groups (Smith et al, 2009). The research design draws on feminist methodology, aiming to make visible the experiences of gender oppression and situate seldom heard voices as key tools in knowledge production (Marshall, 1999; Harding, 1987).

1.2 Introduction to Statutory RSE Policy in England

Education on sexuality and relationships is recognised as an integral part of supporting children and young people's development, health, and wellbeing worldwide (World Health Organisation, 2010). Statutory Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in England was introduced as part of changes to the Children and Social Care Act 2017, which made the provision of the subject, in accordance with the statutory guidance (Department for Education, 2019a), a mandatory requirement for all secondary schools. Whilst initially set to become legally enforceable by 2020, the date by which schools were expected to comply was postponed until 2021 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Long, 2023). The statutory guidance replaced the Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) guidance published under the New Labour government in 2000 (Department for Education and Employment, 2000). The SRE guidance was non-statutory, and schools were not legally required to provide sex education outside of content included within the National Science Curriculum (i.e. human reproduction and HIV/AIDs) (Monk, 2001). Schools were encouraged to take the guidance into consideration, but ultimately the delivery and content of school-based SRE was left to the discretion of school leadership and governors (Monk, 2001). This resulted in highly inconsistent and sporadic SRE provision across English schooling, with Ofsted finding that over two thirds of schools required significant improvement in their delivery by 2013 (Ofsted, 2013). As such, the introduction of the statutory RSE guidance was framed as a

means to ensure consistency across educational contexts and recognise the rapidly changing needs of young people in the digital age (Greening, 2017).

1.3 Introduction to Catholicism and Catholic Schooling

Catholicism refers to a denomination of Christianity that subscribes to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. As of 2019, around 7% of the adult population in England identify as Catholic (Clements and Bullivant, 2022). There are 2,169 Catholic schools and academies in England, 340 of which are secondary schools, educating over 850,000 pupils (Catholic Education Service, 2020; Catholic Education Service, *FAQs,* n.d). The majority of Catholic schools in England are voluntary aided, which means they receive 90% of their funding from either local authorities or directly from the government in the case of academies, and the remaining 10% is covered by the Catholic Church (Catholic Education Service, *FAQs,* n.d). Catholic churches and schools are administratively overseen by 22 dioceses across England and Wales, each led by a bishop or archbishop (Catholic Education Service, 2014). Catholic schools in England are voluntary-aided, or academy-converters, which means they are exempt from the 50% cap on religious admissions in place for religious free-schools (newly opened academies) (Academies Act, 2010; Schools Admission Code, 2021). As such, they are currently permitted to select 100% of pupils on religious grounds if there are more applicants than places (Schools Admission Code, 2021) In the case they are undersubscribed, traditional catchment admissions procedures are used (p. 16).
At present, around 60% of students and staff within Catholic schools identify as Catholic (Catholic Education Service, *FAQs,* n.d.). In turn, this leaves a remaining 40% of pupils who are not Catholic, which brings into question the ability of RSE premised on distinctly Catholic sexual values to meet and reflect their needs.

1.4 Thesis Outline

1.4a Chapter Two

Chapter Two comprises a narrative literature review exploring the discursive treatment of adolescence and girlhood in relation to sexuality. First, drawing on the work of Ball (1994) and Bacchi (1999), this chapter explores how adolescent sexuality is conceptualised within

sexual health policies, and how this intersects with our societal assumptions about adolescence as a life-stage. Second, I explore the production of narratives surrounding 'risk' within sex education and health discourses. Following this, I offer a comprehensive 'genealogy' of girlhood (Driscoll, 2003) that explores normative expectations of girls within neoliberal societies, in relation to work and education, consumerism, sexuality, motherhood , and childbearing. Finally, I explore the prolific problematisation of adolescent pregnancy within sex education and health policy, and how this contributes to and maintains potentially harmful narratives of gender, race, and class within young women's lives. This chapter provides groundwork for exploration of RQ 2 *What are young women's lived experiences of statutory RSE in Catholic schools?* and RQ 3 *Does RSE delivered in Catholic schools reflect and meet the current needs of young women in England?* by questioning how young women's experiences may be shaped by dominant discourses of youth and sexuality within RSE policy and delivery.

1.4b Chapter Three

Chapter Three outlines the policy landscape surrounding the delivery of statutory RSE in English Catholic schools. In the first section, I provide a comprehensive and analytical chronology of developments in English sex education policy between the Thatcher administration of 1979, and the 2024 general election. This section aims to map the contentious history of sex education policy in England and the role of wider political ideologies in shaping its delivery. Further, it aims to outline the political conditions which made possible the introduction of statutory RSE. In the latter sections of this chapter, I explore the unique positioning of Catholic schools within English education. Further, I critically engage with literature surrounding Catholic sexual ethics, with particular regard for feminist critiques, and explore the subsequent implications for Catholic sex education delivery. This chapter begins to address RQ 1 *How do Catholic sexual values intersect with statutory RSE requirements in Catholic schools?* by establishing a comprehensive outline of the key developments and central tenets of both statutory RSE policy and Catholic sexual values.

1.4c Chapter Four

Chapter Four explores the overarching methodology and research design employed within this thesis. First, I define and explore what it means to conduct feminist research, and how this shapes the research process through the adoption of a reflexive approach. Second, I outline the central ontological and epistemological positions assumed within this research; constructivism, feminist standpoint theory, hermeneutics, and phenomenology. Third, I present the qualitative research design employed within the present study, comprising of semi-structured focus groups with young women (n=11), and one-to-one interviews with teachers (n=3). I discuss the rationale for each of the data collection methods and explore the central benefits of each approach for feminist, 'sensitive topic' research. Building on this, I explore the selection of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as an analytic framework, and outline the necessary steps taken to employ this approach. Finally, I offer a comprehensive discussion of ethical research with children and young people, and outline the procedures employed to ensure ethical research practice within this study. This chapter provides critical insight into how the phenomenological focus of RQs 2-4 shaped the research design and relationships exercised throughout the present study.

1.4d Chapter Five

Chapter Five presents results from the three semi-structured interviews with teachers delivering RSE across the two participating Catholic schools. Following Smith et al's (2009) guidance on organising results from IPA studies, it offers findings and discussion simultaneously. The chapter explores six master themes resulting from the teachers' experiences and perceptions of Catholic RSE delivery; Desire to Make A Difference, Pupil (Dis)Engagement, Conflicted Relationship to Catholicism, Relationship to Role, Team Identity and Relationships, and Barriers to Delivery. This chapter demonstrates that delivering RSE in Catholic contexts is an emotionally laden, and at times, challenging task that often brings teachers' professional and personal identities, experiences, and values into question. Principally this chapter addresses RQ 1 '*How do Catholic sexual values intersect with statutory RSE requirements in Catholic schools?*' by examining staff experiences of integrating statutory guidance into a Catholic learning context. Further, it lays the foundation for the exploration of RQ 4 '*How do the experiences of staff delivering RSE in*

Catholic schools collude or contrast with young women's experiences?' by providing rich insight into the lived experiences and perceptions of teachers actively delivering Catholic RSE.

1.4e Chapter Six

Chapter six explores one overarching theme of 'Fraught Sexual Landscapes', emergent from both focus groups with young women. As with Chapter Five, it presents findings and discussion alongside each other. This chapter aims to contextualise the participants experiences and perceptions of Catholic RSE through exploration of their lived experiences of the 'ecosystems of youth socio-sexual life' (Setty, 2023a, p. 4). The chapter is divided into four sections, comprising several master themes presented across the pupil focus groups. These themes relate to the normalisation of sexual harassment, sexual values, gendered division and socio-sexual pressures. This chapter principally addressed RQ 3 '*Does RSE delivered in Catholic schools reflect and meet the current needs of young women in England?'* by establishing the key concerns and challenges faced by the participants in relation to gender-structures, relationships, and sexuality. These experiences are analysed in relation to existing research, and the experiences of the teachers outlined in Chapter Five.

1.4f Chapter Seven

Chapter Seven addresses the young women's lived experiences and perceptions of RSE delivery at their schools. It addresses all four research questions through the exploration of four overarching themes expressed across the two pupil focus groups. These include (Dis)engagement in RSE, Conflicted Relationships to Catholicism, Relationships to Adults, and Reliance on Self-Education. It follows the presentation of findings and discussion presented in Chapters Five and Six. This chapter aims to explore how young women relate to Catholic RSE and situate their experiences within existing research on both secular and faith-based approaches to sex education. Further, it aims to explore how their experiences of RSE intersect with their broader experiences of socio-sexual landscapes, and contrast these with the teachers' experiences explored in Chapter Five.

1.4g Chapter Eight

Chapter Eight offers the conclusion to the thesis. In the first section, I reiterate the rationale and aims underpinning the research discussed. Second, I summarise the research design and outline key limitations emerging within the present study. I then present a concise summary of the research findings in relation to each of the four research questions. Following this, I provide recommendations and emerging implications for education policy, RSE practice in Catholic schools, and further research. Finally, I offer concluding remarks and some final thoughts on the research discussed within this thesis.

1.5 Summary

This thesis explores student and staff experiences of the implementation of statutory RSE in Catholic secondary schools. This specific intersection of religious sexual values and statutory content is an as yet unexplored area of English education policy. Adopting a feminist, phenomenological methodology, this research specifically focuses on the lived experiences of young women, as RSE is found to hold pervasive influence on how young women's sexuality is understood and enacted. Considering potential areas of tension between Catholic theology and statutory RSE content, this thesis asks whether RSE delivered through a distinctly Catholic lens can adequately meet the needs of young women in the 21st century.

Chapter Two: A Theoretical Framework for Understanding Girlhood and Sexuality in English Public Policy

'*We are spoken by policies; we take up positions constructed for us within policies*'
(Ball, 1994, p. 22)

2.1 What's the Problem in RSE?

The 21st century has seen seismic change in the socio-political positioning of young women. Relationships and Sex education (RSE) is increasingly recognised as a central component of health, gender equality and empowerment policy initiatives that aim to bolster this rise of young women globally (WHO, 2013). Despite this, feminist research has demonstrated the potential for sex education to produce and maintain restrictive ideals of girlhood which can impede young women's ability to exercise sexual agency (Fine, 1992). In order to effectively analyse the role of RSE in shaping societal understandings of girlhood, it must first be asked - *what problem is this policy attempting to solve?* Bacchi's (1999, p.2) 'What's the Problem?' approach to policy analysis maintains that objects of policy interventions are not tangible 'out there' problems, but rather construed through 'competing interpretations or representations' of social conditions. Ball (1994) advocates for an understanding of 'policy as discourse', meaning the texts and deeds of the state play a constitutive role in how we know, speak about and experience society, as highlighted in the prefacing quote for this chapter. Drawing on Irvine's (2004, p.10) situation of sex education as a site of 'discursive politics', meaning its narratives, phrases and symbols play a significant role in how young people and adults enact and relate to sexuality, RSE and the surrounding policy landscape can be seen to both inform and are informed by wider narratives of girlhood. In turn, this chapter aims to map the discourse of girlhood and sexuality in contemporary Western society and explore subsequent intersections with health and education policy.

Drawing on literature from girlhood studies, youth studies, and sex education research between 1978 and the present day, Chapter Two provides a theoretical framework through which the development of statutory RSE (Chapter Three, p. 40) and its subsequent impact on young women's lives (Chapter Seven, p. 194) can be better contextualised and

understood. This discussion begins to address RQ 2 *'What are young women's lived experiences of statutory RSE in Catholic schools?'* and RQ 3 '*Does RSE delivered in Catholic schools reflect and meet the current needs of young women in England?'* by examining how young women are understood and presented within sex education and health policy discourse, and how, in turn, this may begin to shape the material experiences of girlhood in England.

2.2 Literature Review Strategy

This project is underpinned by a phenomenological methodology, as will be addressed at length in Chapter 4 (p. 75). As such, this project is driven by an interpretivist research philosophy; one that is rooted in the lived experiences and perceptions of people (Schwandt, 1994). Beyond shaping the data collection and analysis of this project, this methodology has strongly informed my approach to reviewing the literature. Bryman (2016, p. 110) argues that for interpretivist researchers, reviewing literature stands to 'enrich human discourse'. Systematic and scoping reviews, that aim to minimise human bias within the reviewing process, are well suited to positivist research designs that seek objectivity (Bryman, 2016; Campbell and Wasco, 2000; Tranfield et al, 2003). However, narrative literature review approaches, as employed in this chapter, are well suited to examining thematic and theoretical connections across a body of literature (Baumeister and Leary, 1997; Clark et al, 2021). Bryman (2016) argues that narrative literature reviews are most commonly used within inductive research, whereby establishing the theoretical parameters of the work prior to data collection would hinder the findings. This thesis is best described as abductive research, as no feminist research can claim to be wholly inductive due to the initial grounding in feminist theory (Maynard, 2004). Nevertheless, Bryman (2016) emphasises that narrative reviews allow researchers to feel for the limits of their research topics, bringing to light subjects and fields of research they may have previously been unaware of. As such, narrative reviewing was deemed the most appropriate approach for this chapter.

Unlike systematic approaches, narrative approaches do not require the use of specific search protocols, reporting frameworks or meta-analyses (Jahan et al, 2016). As such, literature within this chapter is synthesised and presented thematically. Literature searches were primarily conducted using a snowballing technique, in which potentially relevant literature is collated through scanning the reference lists of initial search results (Sayers, 2008).

2.3 Young People and Public Policy

Children and young people's lives are mediated by the public sector in ways quite unlike other age groups. Fine and McClelland (2006) argue that adolescents' education and development is highly dependent on public policy, and therefore it is necessary to pay close critical attention to the interventions that shape their lives. Whilst I agree that the heavy presence of public policy within the lives of adolescence bolsters the need for critical analysis of such interventions, I query the use of the term 'dependence' to describe this relationship. I would go further than this, emphasising the constitutive relationship between public policy and how we enact and know ourselves (Ball, 1994). Young people continuously are captured between spaces of policy intervention and regulation, such as social care, health, education, and youth justice. While the supportive and often critically important role many of these interventions play must be acknowledged, it too must be recognised that, adopting a view of policy as discourse (Ball, 1994; Bacchi, 1999), young peoples' self-knowledge, lived experiences and worldview of sexuality are necessarily shaped by policy. As such, understanding the scope of impact of policy discourse both within the RSE classroom and young women's lives is extremely pertinent.

A prominent assumption that fuels policy interventions in people's, particularly adolescents, lives is the view that they are in deficit of a certain skill, ability or attitude deemed necessary for participation in society (Gaskell et al,1989). Gaskell et al (1989, p. 11) highlight the prominence of this model in schools' will to diagnose and remedy perceived deficits in vulnerable pupils – whether that be language skills, confidence issues or 'underdeveloped cognitive skills'. This framework positions teaching interventions as a means to 'make up the deficit' in these pupils' skillsets (p. 11). Fundamentally, this model rests on a pre-construed

level of knowledge which we, as adults, feel young people ought to have. With regard to RSE, some questions emerge – What are young people in deficit of when it comes to knowledge of sex and relationships? What do we assume to be the problem in need of intervention?

The statutory RSE guidance positions comprehensive sex education as part of preparing young people for adult life: *'To embrace the challenges of creating a happy and successful adult life, pupils need knowledge that will enable them to make informed decisions about their wellbeing, health and relationships and to build their self-efficacy.'* (Department for Education, 2019a, p. 8). Utilising Bacchi's (1999) framework, this statement offers an implicit view that young people may be *in deficit* of essential knowledge needed to exercise informed choice and self-efficacy. Building on Jones' (2011) modelling of varying pedagogical positions of sex education, this reflects a [neo]-liberal positionality. This pedagogy situates young people as 'informed decision makers', whereby it is role of adults to provide information with which pupils are expected to exercise 'responsible', individual decision making to mitigate risk (p. 378). Jones (2011) goes on to outline conservative, critical and post-structural positions, however, I find her descriptors of liberalism considerably more effective in capturing the current state of youth sexuality in English policy and society. I will later address how these positions further intersect with our conceptions of adolescence and childhood. Overall, the implicit focus on individual responsibility within the RSE guidance places the onus of decision making on young people, and fails to engage with structural issues that may pivotally shape the ways in which they enact and understand sexuality and gender. Furthermore, the positioning of adults as inherent *information providers* within neoliberal RSE pedagogies fails to recognise children and young people as agentic and self-knowledgeable subjects.

2.4 Understanding Adolescence: Storm and Stress?

Further applying Bacchi's (1999) approach to policy analysis necessitates the study not just of *what* is problematised, but also *who* becomes a policy issue. In the case of RSE, analysis of the presuppositions surrounding teenagers becomes pertinent.

2.4a 'Discovering' Adolescence

Adolescence is often understood as an 'immutable' life-stage with fixed cultural, biological and behavioural implications (Lesko, 1996, p. 140; Driscoll, 2003). This construction is arguably founded in Hall's (1915) scientific 'discovery' of adolescence, which identified psychological and behavioural characteristics tied to an essentialised identity of 'the adolescent'. His work situated adolescence as a point of 'Storm and Stress', characterised by hormonal turmoil, impulsivity and ever-changing emotions (Griffin, 1993, p. 16). Fundamentally, Hall's modelling of life-course situated adolescence as a liminal, tumultuous period sandwiched between the stasis of childhood and adulthood (Griffin, 1993). This view was propagated throughout 20th century research into adolescence. Anna Freud argued that adolescence was a point of inevitable 'psychic turmoil and vulnerability', stressing the need to create balance between desire satisfaction and control in young peoples' lives in order to manage this (p. 20). Driscoll (2003, p. 6) argues that the dominant western construction of adolescence has become one of 'universal trauma', a disruption of childhood before the projected stability of adulthood. Overall, whilst adolescence is in no way a new phenomenon, our core understandings of young people are pervasively shaped by biologically determinist views developed in the 20th century.

The rhetoric of 'discovering' adolescence as a tangible, static life-stage has drawn significant critique from post-structural perspectives. Adolescence is not a 'real' object we can uncover, but rather it is brought into existence through how it is understood, spoken and known about (Driscoll, 2003; Bay-Cheng, 2003). This line of post-structural criticism draws upon Foucault's (1978) work, viewing knowledge and meaning of people as constituted through discourse. In this view, Hall's 'discovery' of adolescence does more than simply describe a group of young people, but also powerfully shapes the experience and perception of teenagers in contemporary society (Griffin, 1993).

Applying a Foucauldian framework, Griffin (1993) argues that the work of Hall (1915) merely presents a combination of discourses of youth, rooted in a specific historical and political context. In her view, Hall's work relies on colonialist, pre-Darwinian notions of evolutionary biology (Griffin, 1993). She argues that Hall's model of life-course mirrors the racist

positioning of African and Asian people as steps on the evolutionary scale to the 'ideal' form of white people, constituting infants, children, adolescents and elderly people as 'primitive', less civilised and less developed (Griffin, 1993, p. 16). The view of adults as the precipice of human development upholds a representation of adolescents as in need of 'civilising', as such justifying stringent measures to control their 'primitive' ways. Hall's work combined Christian ideals with psychology and biology, therefore constructing sexual expression, namely masturbation, as an impulsive vice, further informing a repression of teenage sexuality (Griffin, 1993). Bay-Cheng (2003, p. 62) argues that dominant discourses of adolescence construe young people as hyper-sexual, drawing on a 'prevailing drive' model which understand sexuality as a primal, impulsive urge that can over-power human reason. This view justifies adult regulation on the basis that teen's undeveloped reasoning and lack of self-control place them at risk of succumbing to 'insurgent' sexual urges (p. 64). The construction of adolescents as lacking restraint fuels anxiety surrounding their ability to successfully transition into adulthood, which in turn fuels 'institutional mistrust' of young people (Kelly, 2003, p. 166). As such, adolescents are understood as a generation of liability, in need of mediation and surveillance until they successfully pass the 'storm' into adulthood.

2.4b Regulating Youth

Analysis of the problematisation of youth is further bolstered by Foucault's (in Burchell et al, 1991) notion of governmentality. This view is upheld by Besley (2010) who advocates a move beyond cultural studies (as seminally represented by Cohen, 2011) in youth research by incorporating a Foucauldian analysis of neoliberal governmentality. Governmentality refers to the pluralization of governance, beyond that of the state, examining the techniques by which the conduct of individuals becomes regulated (Burchell et al, 1991). This refers to the combination of state and self-governance, hinged to moral, economic and political assumptions, that shapes how people enact their lives (Besley, 2010). It is this relationship between state and self-governance that allows conditions where the freedom of individuals becomes a 'resource for, rather than a hinderance to, the government' (p. 532). Looking to Banet-Weiser et al's (2020, p. 8) definition of neoliberalism as a 'political rationality' that moves from the state to 'the inner workings of the subject', a Foucauldian

lens appears to effectively capture the current position of societal governance. Besley (2010, p. 533) argues that through self-governance, the neoliberal subject becomes an 'expert of themselves', as such enforcing a mandate of individual responsibility and risk mitigation. This creates a new form of subjectivity that seeks to 'insure' individual risk against moral or economic failure (Besley, 2010). This form of subjectivity is visible in the ontological assumptions made of young people in the 'informed decision maker' pedagogy within Western sex education practices (Jones, 2011). In placing emphasis on 'self-efficacy' and 'informed decisions', the 2019 statutory guidance (Department for Education, 2019a) reflects this neoliberal rhetoric, and therefore contributes to an imperative of self-governance for young people in England.

2.4c Problematising Teen 'Sexual Risk Taking'

This section explores how the ontological assumptions of adolescence, as outlined in the prior section, become imbedded in the policy landscape of young peoples' lives. Public health practice pertaining to youth sexuality tends to focus on modifying or mitigating risk taking behaviours and 'life-style choices' (Shoveller and Johnson, 2006, p. 48). Such initiatives primarily rely on epidemiology and the identification of psycho-social risk factors (Shoveller and Johnson, 2006). Coupled with neoliberal narratives of self-governance and insurance against risk (Besley, 2010), this form of policy intervention presupposes that young people are afforded an 'unexamined' level of agency and control (Shoveller and Johnson, 2006, p. 48). This view is supported by Williams (2003, p. 147) who argues that *'risk-factor epidemiology tends to assume a freedom to make healthy choices, that is out of line with what many lay people experience as real possibilities in their everyday lives.'.* Whilst Shoveller and Johnson (2006) and Williams (2003) discuss interventions that primarily happen in healthcare settings, the presupposition of agency and identification of risk factors is arguably present within the terrain of RSE.

Shoveller and Johnson (2006) utilise Foucauldian Discourse Analysis to highlight the long-term impact of the move from 'risky groups' (i.e. gay men and intravenous drug users) to 'risky behaviours' (i.e. unprotected sex, anal sex, promiscuity) within Canadian sex education during the HIV/AIDs crisis (p. 51). This discursive shift, coupled with the

integration of 'peer education' programmes in the late 1980s, engaged young people in a categorisation exercise of themselves and their peers as sexually safe/unsafe, responsible/irresponsible (Shoveller and Johnson, 2006, p. 51). It is at this time that youth sexual health programmes focused on 'responsible decision making' were mainstreamed (Shoveller and Johnson, 2006, p. 53). This approach produces a rhetoric of 'unsanctioned sexual behaviour', often resulting from some form of character deficit within the young people who engage in them (Shoveller and Johnson, 2006). A focus on lacking self-esteem, resilience or responsibility places the onus of managing sexual risk on the individual young person, negating any consideration of structural and material conditions which may constrain their choices (Shoveller and Johnson, 2006). In turn, Shoveller and Johnson (2006) argue that risk-driven sexual health programmes can, albeit unintentionally, create a culture of shame, divisiveness and fear for young people learning about sexuality. In my view, Shoveller and Johnson's work (2006) offers a highly transferable analysis of the discursive impact of health initiatives driven by individual risk mitigation. Given the centrality of individual 'informed decision making' and efficacy within the statutory guidance (Department for Education, 2019), English RSE similarly risks reinforcing a divisive narrative of sanctioned vs. unsanctioned behaviours and traits in young people.

2.4d Risk Mitigation in Sex Education Policy

Intervention within 'personal' realms of life such as sexuality is broadly something neoliberal governments attempt to dissociate with, not wanting to be seen as the 'nanny state' (Bacchi, 1999, p. 4). However, as Watts (1993) argues, the fragmentation of policy interventions via various 'expert' offshoots of the state (i.e. social workers, teachers, healthcare workers) enables a range of 'indirect' measures to affect and regulate peoples lives. As such, whilst statutory RSE, from a policy perspective, is the sole responsibility of schools, the aims and core principles of RSE are mirrored and articulated across the work of other state agencies.

RSE is listed as part of the Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Framework (TPPF), which offers a multi-agency, ten stage model for local authorities to reduce adolescent pregnancies in their area (Public Health England, 2018). As such, whilst the statutory guidance does not mention

reducing pregnancy rates as a central aim of RSE delivery (Department for Education, 2019a), the locality of RSE within the TPPF suggests that a specific problematisation of adolescent pregnancy, as a central 'risk' of teenage sexuality, plays a role in the discursive terrain of sex education in England.

Kirby (2007) offers a detailed synthesis of sex education programmes in the US, testing the efficacy of varying forms of school-based intervention in reducing 'risk taking' behaviour in young people. His work is widely celebrated as a key catalyst for the transformation of sex education delivery in the US, principally in shaping the move away from federal funded abstinence only programmes (Kantor et al, 2014). Critical engagement with Kirby (2001; 2007) is pertinent to this review as he is cited throughout the TPPF and local authority reports that seek to rationalise policy interventions to reduce teen pregnancy rates (Public Health England, 2018). Whilst the significance of Kirby's contribution to the quality and direction of US sex education must be recognised (Kantor et al, 2014), I argue that some of Kirby's (2007) measures of sexual risk may reinforce potentially harmful narratives surrounding adolescent sexuality. In particular, I find the inclusion of 'initiation of sex' and 'number of partners' as prominent risk factors, in comparison to categories such as use of condoms or other contraceptive measures, troubling. Drawing on Bay-Cheng's (2003) argument, this reflects the privileging of certain kinds of sexual behaviour and relationship within the aims of sex education. Notably, this represents monogamous and passive behaviours as 'less risky' and therefore a more desirable behavioural outcome from sex education interventions. This is further seen in Kirby's (2007, p. 27) problematisation of the median gap of twelve years between puberty and marriage as 'a long period in which they [teens] need to avoid unintended pregnancy and STDs'. To me, this statement erroneously situates marriage as the finish line, a point after which the 'risks' of adolescent sexuality are curtailed.

Secondly, the proposition of a social norms-connectedness model (Kirby, 2001, p. 279) to explain teen sexual risk-taking behaviour fails to account for agency and diversity in adolescent sexual decision making. In essence this model argues that proximity and connectedness to group norms surrounding sexuality is the largest determinant of sexual risk taking for young people. Thus, Kirby (2001) argues that higher degrees of connection to

groups or institutions (i.e. school, family, Church) with more stringent views on pre-marital or unprotected sex would predict less sexual risk taking. Conversely, he situates connectedness to peers or the media as a predictor for more sexual risk taking (Kirby, 2001). Whilst I accept that proximity to varying discourses of sex may shape how young people perceive and enact sexuality, I find the assertion that those close to institutions that uphold stringent anti-sex positions take less sexual risks frustrating. Kirby (2001) fails to fully unpick the exact kinds of stringent messages referred to, yet, looking at the work of Fine (1992), anti-sex discourses within schools have been tied to significant hinderances in sexual efficacy, agency and well-being, particularly for young women – in turn, bolstering sexual risk taking. Tolman (2002) shares this view, highlighting the experiences of young women of colour who feel unable to communicate safety needs (i.e. wish to a use a condom) during sexual encounters due to prevalent anti-sex discourse. Furthermore, Kirby's (2007) own work rejects abstinence only programmes for their ineffectiveness in preventing risk-taking. Overall, I find this form of quantitative modelling insufficient in capturing the ways in which social discourses and cultures of sex shape adolescent sexual decision making. Despite this, Kirby's work is useful insofar as it allows insight into the dominant perceived problems that motivate sex education policy interventions.

In the next section I will explore how this discursive framework of adolescence informs how we societally understand girlhood and in turn, how this impacts the lived experiences of young womanhood.

2.5 A Genealogy of Girlhood

The problematisation of adolescence is further compounded by normative expectations and discourses of gender. In this section, I develop a genealogy of girlhood in England, drawing centrally on the work of prominent feminist youth theorists including Harris (2003), McRobbie (2007), and Walkerdine et al (2001). This draws on Driscoll's (2003) work in which she disrupts traditional historical treatment of girls and youth, rejecting the attempt to find a locus of girlhood, instead exploring how 'girlhood' has been mobilised throughout society and how this shapes the lived meaning and experience of being a girl. This form of analysis

builds on Foucault's model of historiography and therefore does not look for causes or origins but rather maps ideas and knowledge within certain contexts (Driscoll, 2003, p.3). Driscoll's (2003) work examines how girls have been articulated through culture, political discourse and institutions. In essence, this chapter explores how girlhood and sexuality are articulated through RSE and its surrounding policies. Specifically, this section examines how the political climate of neoliberalism has formed and upholds discourses of successful girlhood.

In the current moment, young women are perceived as central players in contemporary labour and consumer markets like never before (McRobbie, 2007). In analysing contemporary constructions of girlhood, I find Rottenberg's definition of neoliberalism to provide the best foundation for understanding the socio-economic conditions in which they are produced: *' I understand neoliberalism not just as a set of economic policies but as a dominant political rationality that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject, recasting individuals as human capital and thus capital-enhancing agents.'*(Rottenberg in Banet Weiser et al, 2020, p. 8). From the 1990s onwards, a considerable body of critical feminist literature has attempted to capture this new mode of neoliberal girlhood. Harris (2003, p. 13) offers a comprehensive analysis of the dichotomous construction of successful 'Can Do' girls versus failed 'At Risk' girls within contemporary constructions of young womanhood. As young women become the markers of progress, so too they become markers of failure. The idealised 'Can Do' girl is rooted in the prevalent 'Girl Power' discourse of the 1990s, constructing self-made, resilient and individualised women, those that easily follow trajectories to success, as the icons of female liberation (Harris, 2003, p. 16). Harris (2003) employs three key areas to characterise 'Can Do' and 'At Risk' young women; work, consumerism and motherhood. These are substantively explored in the following sections.

2.5a Girls at Work

Centrally, ‘Can Do’ girls are characterised by their ability to ‘seize opportunity’ within neoliberal economies; obtaining high quality education and extra-curricular experience from a young age to enhance their earning capacity later in life (Harris, 2003, p. 17: Kehily, 2008) This rhetoric has become deeply entrenched in corporate and governmental ‘gender equality’ initiatives, sparking high profile campaigns aiming to bolster young women in education or the workplace. Playing into the ‘feminist common-sense’ ideology discussed by McRobbie (2007, p. 719), the idea of successful women in the workplace has become a normative, desirable and ‘progressive’ aim for companies and institutions to strive towards (Harris, 2003). Fundamentally, this speaks to the ‘corporate-friendly’ feminism that, as highlighted by Banet-Weiser et al (2020, p. 10), centralises female visibility within the dominant economic system. Building on Harris’s work, McRobbie (2007) argues that young women are increasingly measured against individualised, competitive values; assessing their capacity within a neoliberal labour market. As such ‘Can Do’ girls have become a social category newly charged with economic capacity (McRobbie, 2007). Whilst this may seem to represent a pioneering generation of young women, critical attention to the post-feminist idealism of ‘career girls’ and how this construction of economic opportunity informs broader gender discourses is necessary.

Contrary to the rhetoric of ‘girls with the world at their feet’, young women who fail to prove themselves as viable economic agents are situated within a discourse of failure, delinquency and vulnerability (Harris, 2003). Within neoliberal narratives, structural inequalities that render education and career opportunities inaccessible are reframed as laziness, incompetence, misguided ambitions and ‘troubled’ backgrounds (Harris, 2003). As such, the standards of successful girlhood are entrenched with classist and racist exclusions, producing a category of ‘At Risk’ girls from already marginalised backgrounds (Harris, 2003, p. 25). Many initiatives designed to support young women subscribe to the individualised constructions of failure emblematic of neoliberal labour structures, focusing on negative attitudes, misaligned ambitions and lacking self-confidence (Harris, 2003). Banet-Weiser (2018) highlights this uncritical framing of limitations facing young women in education and work fields as a central tenet of liberal feminism, with minimal attention paid to transforming the material conditions afflicting the livelihoods of young women. Fundamentally, this body of work reveals a sinister underpinning of this new ‘active

girlhood' (Kehily, 2008). The visibility of young women in economic spheres is largely only available to a select few, those who already benefit from middle class status. As such, those unable to meet the high standards of the 'Can Do' career girl due to the structural inequity of education and employment systems are rendered as failures, unable to seize the 'world at their feet' (Harris, 2003, p. 13). As such, it is important to recognise that the visible rise of 'Can Do' girls in neoliberal economies has not resulted in the empowerment and betterment of material conditions for young women as a whole.

2.5b Consumerism

A further defining feature of the socio-economic positions of girlhood in the 21st century is the clear and distinct situation of young women as a consumer-market. Harris (2003, p. 19) notes the distinct turn of 'girl power' becoming an advertising strategy in the 1990s. In contemporary advertising, the 'in-control' young woman has become a common trope, evoking a distinct luxury consumer lifestyle of the 'Can Do' girl (Harris, 2003). Over two-decades on from Harris' (2003) writing, this trope is further exacerbated by the heightened normativity of popular feminism within consumer contexts. This is addressed by Banet-Weiser (2018) who highlights how rhetoric of empowerment, self-confidence and self-love have become the visible, marketable and consumable front of feminism. As such, young women are invited to buy into the image, the lifestyle and work towards being the idealised 'Can Do' woman. This is what Harris (2003, p. 18) deems the 'DIY project of the self'.

Harris (2003) argues that the marketisation of young womanhood in this way produces a converse issue of 'incorrect' patterns of consumption in young women. Building on Griffin (1997), she extends notions of consumerism and leisure to include markets of drugs, alcohol and sex. As such, young women who fail to engage in the fundamentally exclusionary 'Can Do' girl lifestyle are seen to engage in disordered patterns of consumerism by association with the aforementioned alternative 'markets', further producing them as 'At Risk.

2.5c Pregnancy and Motherhood

One of the most significant factors shaping public policy regarding young women and sexuality in neoliberal contexts is the social construction of motherhood and pregnancy. The idealisation of economic capacity within neoliberal labour structures produces a deep-set rejection of early motherhood, as it is seen to infringe upon academic and financial potential (Harris, 2003; Walkerdine et al, 2001; McRobbie, 2007; Kehily, 2008). As such, Harris' (2003, p. 22) work highlights how delayed motherhood has become a central tenet of the successful 'Can Do' girl model. Young women face pressures not to succumb to the failure of young motherhood, yet to maintain expectations of normative adult womanhood by still desiring to have children once their career is established (Harris, 2003). The 'Can Do' girl therefore relies on birth control measures to stave off the 'threat' of early pregnancy until the appropriate life stage (Harris, 2003).

Conversely, teen motherhood and pregnancy significantly play into the production of the 'At Risk' girl as an emblem of failed femininity. An expansive collection of feminist work explores the problematisation of teen motherhood along class-based and racialised axes, which I will further explore in later sections. Fundamentally, young motherhood is seen to represent lack of economic capacity, lack of personal ambition and discipline, and an over dependency on the state (Harris, 2003). McRobbie (in Harris, 2003, p. 30) describes a social construction of young mothers in England as 'the bad girls of the New Labour society', as such reifying the societal treatment of young motherhood as the enemy of neoliberalism.

2.5d Superwomen and Supergirls

By synthesising literature surrounding girlhood in the 21st century, we begin to build a distinct model of successful young womanhood, as produced by the socio-economic climate of neoliberalism. Notably, much of the work discussed is situated in an early 2000s context. However, I find that notions of the 'Can Do' girl transfer well into the 2020s when viewed in amalgamation with more recent works that explore the impact of post-feminism/popular feminism on constructions of femininity. Looking at the collective work of Gill, Banet-Weiser and Rottenberg (2020), in which they discuss the societal impact of post-feminism and neoliberal feminism, similar patterns of normative expectations regarding economic capacity, 'correct' consumerism and controlled fertility emerge. Their work highlights the

production of the 'Superwoman model'; the imperative for women to balance attainment of professional and financial success with a family life (Banet-Weiser et al, 2020, p. 14). Rottenberg (2018) highlights increasing pressures for women to enhance their value as human capital through all professional and personal spheres. Fundamentally, this demonstrates that neoliberal conceptions of womanhood and girlhood are intrinsically defined by the continued pressures to perform as economically independent, valuable agents, and are underpinned by the social regulation of women's childbearing capacity. In the next sections, I analyse the bodies of literature pertaining to young women, sexuality and public policy, asking how each interacts with the 'neoliberalised' notions of what it is to successfully be a girl.

2.5e Sexualisation and Subjectivity

The neoliberal model of the agentic, opportunistic, 'Can Do' girl runs into issues when it comes to sexuality. In the 21st century, young women's sexuality is surrounded by a complex, contradictory set of post-feminist and conservative narratives. A significant body of feminist scholarship in the early 2000s highlights the imperative for women to be sexually active, desiring and desirable imbedded within popular media (Gill, 2007; Levy, 2005; Ringrose, 2011). This describes the conditions of 'raunch culture', which upholds a commercialised, male oriented and highly visible mode of female sexuality as 'liberated'' (Levy, 2005, p. 29). Egan and Hawkes (2008) highlight the simultaneous moralistic concern that exposure to sexualised media will 'inflame' the sexuality of young women, leading to dangerous, inappropriate sexual behaviour (Egan and Hawkes, 2008, p. 300). Crucially, neither of these prevalent social narratives offer space for genuine sexual agency, but rather enforce mandated standards of female sexual availability or chastity.

The obscuring of young women's sexual subjectivity is the central thesis of Fine's (1992) seminal piece '*Sexuality, Schooling and Adolescent Females'*. Fine (1992) highlights three prevailing discourses offered to young women within school-based sexuality education; sexuality as violence, sexuality as victimisation, and sexuality as individual morality. She contrasts the prevalence of these narratives against the stark absence of 'desire discourse' which acknowledges young women as sexual subjects (p. 35). She argues that by upholding

narratives of female sexual victimisation and passivity within education, young women's ability to enact sexual agency is reduced to mere resistance against male advances (Fine, 1992, p. 33). This work has stemmed a notable body of phenomenological feminist research that attempts to capture the experiences and voices of young women as they navigate sexual desire and development amidst these discourses (Tolman, 2012; Lamb, 2010). Fine's work intersects strongly with the work of Thompson (1990) and Tolman (1994; 2002), both of whom present rich insights into the sexual lives of young women. Both of these works draw on feminist standpoint epistemology (Tolman, 2002), as such centring the voices and experiences of young women as the site of knowledge production. This body of work demonstrates that fundamentally young women do hold exponential capacity for sexual desire. However, their enactment of their own sexual feelings and their ability to recognise themselves as legitimate sexual subjects are significantly frustrated by normative discourses of gender and sexuality (Thompson, 1990; Tolman, 2002).

Tolman (2002, p. 172) argues that the 'landscape of adolescent sexuality is not an equal opportunity zone'. Race and class structures are inseparable from how women are perceived and perceive themselves as sexual subjects. Young women from marginalised backgrounds face navigating desire amidst a barrage of hyper-sexualised racist and classist stereotypes, systematic violence, poverty and health inequity (Cheng et al, 2014; Tolman, 2002; Fine, 1992). Whilst Fine (1992) does include the voices of some young Women of Colour, the work of Tolman (1994;2002) and Black feminist authors such as Collins (2004) provide more comprehensive accounts of the lived impact of race on the enactment of sexuality. Black women are pervasively constructed as being sexually wild or 'freaky', a stereotype rooted in the colonial notions of Black people as primitive and animalistic (Collins, 2004, p. 120). Tolman (2002) similarly highlights how young women from 'Urban' Latina or Black communities in the US are perceived as 'out of control' and thus more susceptible to the ills of adolescent sexuality (teenage pregnancy, STIs, abuse). In a UK context, this is echoed by Sundaram et al's (2022) finding that Black and South Asian girls face unique and intensified forms of public sexual harassment, which are compounded by racist narratives, the oversexualisation of Black and Brown bodies, and the construction of racially minoritised women as 'exotic'. This juxtaposes the construction of the 'perfect girl' as white, middle class and sexually innocent (Tolman, 2002, p. 171). Notably, both of these

constructions of girlhood and sexuality are constrictive. However, notions of sexuality for young Women of Colour place an onus on lapsed morality, promiscuity and violence in a way they do not for white, middle-class girls. As such, the impact of the discourses surrounding adolescent sexuality is disparate for girls from marginalised communities. In attempt to evade sexual stereotyping, racially minoritised and low-income young women report high degrees of self-policing and silencing of their own desire, forced to navigate desire whilst 'looking over their shoulder' (Tolman, 1994, p. 173). Overall, constructions of girlhood can be seen to shape and dictate how young women relate to their sexuality, producing cultures of silence and fear around desire.

Bay-Cheng (2015) provides an invaluable analysis of young women's sexual agency within contemporary neoliberal culture. She argues that the 'Virgin/Whore Dichotomy' that often underpins normative discourse of female sexuality insufficiently captures contemporary social perceptions of young women's sexual behaviour (p. 281). Instead, Bay-Cheng (2015, p. 282) argues that agency, or the appearance of such, now comprises a central factor within the 'cultural rubric' against which young women's sexuality is arbitrated (Bay-Cheng, 2015, p. 282). This is somewhat addressed by Fine's (1992) discourse of individual morality, which she argues employs a language of self-control and self-respect to encourage abstinence. The shift from the external threat of male sexuality to an onus on personal responsibility to resist sexual activity somewhat speaks to the neoliberal centring of the individual highlighted by Bay-Cheng (2015). However, perhaps due to their time of writing, authors such as Fine (1992) and Tolman (2002) fail to capture the buffer of credibility provided by the appearance of agentic decision making within neoliberal narratives. Bay-Cheng (2015, p. 285) argues that young women are no longer solely judged for the frequency of their sexual activity, but also against the standard of 'doing it for themselves'. As such, cultural appraisals of young women's sexual behaviour now are contingent on the presentation of self-ownership and determination. As highlighted by Bay-Cheng (2015), this speaks to the post-feminist modes of sexuality and the imperative to present as active, desiring agents as raised by Gill (2007) and Levy (2005). Overall, literature surrounding young women and sexual agency deepens understanding of how normative constructions of gender, class and race shape material conditions. This provides a necessary foundation upon which analysis of young women's experiences of RSE can be built. Fundamentally our

enactment of sexuality does not occur within a vacuum, and as such, we must examine how policy interacts with these axes of oppression and expectation.

2.6 Problematic Pregnancies

The prevention of adolescent pregnancy has become a commonplace initiative world-wide, often drawing the focus of policy initiatives and programmes designed to improve the living-standards for women and girls globally (UNESCO, 2019; WHO, 2010). As will be explored in section 3.2b (p. 52), the prevention of adolescent pregnancy has been a pivotal shaping factor in the design and progress of RSE policy in England, particularly under Blair's New Labour government (Connolly et al, 2014). Adolescent pregnancy has been tied to a plethora of serious health and socio-economic outcomes and is identified as the second most common cause of death for women under 19 globally (UNESCO, 2019, p. 22). As such, the prevalent focus on reducing teen birth rates in UK and US social policy appears as an explicable and seemingly progressive aim. However, as highlighted in section 2.5c (p. 34), the problematisation of teenage pregnancy can collude with and reinforce broader narratives of gender, race and class. This is exemplified in the disparate societal treatment of adolescent fathers versus adolescent mothers (Duncan, 2007). As such, analysis of how teenage motherhood became one of the key problems RSE aims to address (Bacchi, 1999), provides critical insight into the broader discursive treatment of girlhood in society. The following section centrally explores feminist criticism of the dominant constructions of adolescent pregnancy and the treatment of young mothers in the UK and US.

2.6a Race and Class

As highlighted by Harris (2003), delayed motherhood is a central tenet of the 'Can Do' girl image. As such, those who become mothers or become pregnant during adolescence are seen to deviate from the normative ideal of girlhood. The work of feminist authors surrounding sexual subjectivity reveals how discourses of young women's sexuality are shaped by racist and classist narratives (Fine, 1992; Tolman, 2002; Bay-Cheng, 2015). In turn, the problematisation of teenage pregnancy is permeated with similarly racialised and

income-based rhetoric. In this section, I address the specific problematisation of adolescent pregnancy for racially minoritised and working class mothers.

The construction of adolescent pregnancy as a primarily working-class issue is addressed at length by Walkerdine et al (2001). In my view, the problematising of teenage pregnancy and motherhood along class-based lines is compounded by three central factors presented within the literature. First, the enactment of safe sex practices necessitates enactment of sexual agency, which is significantly hindered by classist and racist sexual stigma. Walkerdine et al (2001, p. 190) highlight the association between sexual preparedness and 'what slags did' in the narratives presented by working class women. In attempt to mitigate accusations of promiscuity or sexual shaming, working class girls are constrained by ideals of femininity that necessitate sexual unknowingness and passivity (Walkerdine, 2001).This plays into the passive narratives of 'it just happened' present in the voices of young women in Thompson's (1990, p. 349) study of working class women's experiences of sexual agency. As such, use of contraception would be seen to further implicate marginalised young women with the pervasive and harmful narratives of sexual availability that centre low income and racially minoritised women.

Second, pregnancy is constructed as outside of the idealised, middle-class trajectory of girlhood. Walkerdine et al (2001) highlight that for middle-class young women, early pregnancy constitutes a catastrophic threat to academic and economic attainment, and is therefore entirely ruled out as a viable life choice. Interestingly, this is reflected in adolescent conception and abortion rates, with young women in affluent areas of the UK experiencing lower rates of conception, but seeking abortion at higher rates, than those in economically deprived regions (Aluga and Okolie, 2021). For young women already excluded from labour markets and education structures, due to racism and classism, teenage pregnancy is not constructed as the same economic threat it represents for white, middle class women (Phoenix, 1993). Economic opportunities for marginalised young women are not necessarily improved by delayed motherhood (Phoenix, 1993). In fact, the structures of socio-economic inequality and discrimination that exclude Black and working-class women from the workplace success experienced by middle-class, white women are not mitigated by regulating fertility, as such marginalised young women may not see reason to

delay motherhood (Phoenix, 1993). As highlighted by Walkerdine et al (2001) even when working class girls are academically successful, motherhood may feel more accessible and less alienating than middle-class spheres of education and professionalism. Conversely, Duncan (2007) finds that for some young, working class mothers, having children was viewed as a route to social mobility away from poverty and as a catalyst for pursuing academic and career success. Overall, the broad construction of adolescent pregnancy as antithetical to middle class girlhoods leads to a societal narrative of teenage motherhood as a working class positionality.

Third, there is a prevalent discourse of 'welfare scrounging' surrounding both working class and racially minoritised young mothers (Walkerdine et al, 2001, p. 189). The rhetoric that young mothers are a drain on state resources is prevalent in both US and UK contexts (Pearce, 1993; Phoenix, 1993; Barcelos, 2018). This has been the dominant narrative surrounding adolescent pregnancy in much public discourse and policy, with a government minister proclaiming young motherhood 'the passport to a council flat and benefit income' in 1995 (Walkerdine et al, 2001, p. 189). In the US, there have been several prominent policy attempts to reduce young mothers dependency on state welfare, including reinstating their status as dependents on their parents, and thus unable to claim financial support for dependents of their own (Pearce, 1993). Crucially, this demonization of state dependency reflects the reification of individualised economic capacity within neoliberal systems, and in turn, situates those who cannot independently provide for their families as inadequate parents (Phoenix, 1993).

This rhetoric is deeply imbedded in contemporary public policy in the UK. Under the New Labour government, the UK saw exponential growth in initiatives designed the curtail teenage pregnancy rates, which at the time were the highest in Europe (Connolly et al, 2014). This included an injection of funding into contraceptive delivery to young women and the development of the 2000 Sex and Relationships Education guidance (Connolly et al, 2014; Department of Education and Employment, 2000). Within a policy context, some may be quick to celebrate these as progressive markers for young women. However, the reduction of teenage pregnancy within the context of neoliberal societies, such as Britain under New Labour is fundamentally underpinned by the goal of reducing the 'greater

dependence' associated with adolescent motherhood (Department of Education and Employment, 2000, p. 15). For this reason, as argued by McRobbie (in Harris, 2003, p. 30) young mothers became emblemised as the 'bad girls of the New Labour society'. The economic demonization of adolescent sexuality and pregnancy continues to define public policy in the UK in the current political climate under the Conservative government. Hanbury and Eastham (2016) argue that these concerns surrounding young women's fertility are heightened within a climate of austerity, encouraging budget constrained health services to implement long acting reversible contraceptive (LARC) methods as a cost-cutting measure. We see this attitude further reflected in Kirby's (2007) work, as cited in the Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Framework (TTPF): *'When teens become pregnant or contract an STD, they, their children, and society at large often pay a significant price, both in human and in monetary terms'*(Kirby, 2007, p. 12 Public Health England, 2018)

Kirby's work problematises young motherhood along distinctly economic lines. In emphasising the human and monetary cost of adolescent childbearing, young mothers become constituted not only as 'risky' to themselves, but as risky to the well-being of society at large. This presents a larger issue when considering that the TPPF forms some of the central strategic policy documentation for local authority RSE implementation – with RSE listed as one of ten key strategies within the prevention framework (Public Health England, 2018, p. 7). Therefore, the construction of young mothers as an economic burden has become part and parcel of the policy landscape of RSE in England.

The problematising of Black teenage motherhood also rests on the neoliberal distain for economic dependency on the state, namely as race and poverty are strongly intersecting spheres of oppression (Phoenix, 1993). However, the socio-economic chastising of young Black mothers is further compounded by an entrenched history of eugenicist ideology within reproductive public policy. Davis (1981) highlights how, due to the history of birth control being used as a tool of colonialism and eugenicist social cleansing, many Black women felt dissonance with the reproductive rights movement of the 1970s. High profile advocates of the early Birth Control movement, such as Margaret Sanger, subscribed to eugenicist concerns about the overpopulation of minority groups and the erasure of the white race (Davis, 1981). The US in particular has a recent history, lasting well into the 20th

century, of coercive and non-consensual uses of sterilisation or invasive birth control measures on poor Women of Colour (Davis, 1981). Furthermore, many contemporary feminist authors have addressed the vast contraceptive bias in the US, with Women of Colour disproportionately recommended long-acting Birth Control measures compared to their white counterparts (Higgins, 2016; Roberts, 1997; Volscho, 2011; Barcelos, 2018). Fundamentally, this reflects a specific problematising of Black and Latina motherhood. Phoenix (1993, p. 87) argues that black families are implicated with social ills such as violence, drug use and poverty. She further argues that reproductive policy in the US in underpinned by a deep-set fear that Women of Colour will produce 'Problematic Children'. Additionally, returning to the sexual stereotyping faced by Women of Colour, racist notions of hypersexuality and overpopulation lead to the construction of adolescent motherhood as a 'cultural thing' of minority populations (Barecelos, 2018, p. 206). As such, the socio-political construction of Black teenage motherhood compounds two sets of fears; those surrounding the 'failure' of early motherhood and those pertaining to colonial, racist beliefs.

2.6b Normative Life Chronologies

The societal admonition of teenage mothers rests significantly on normative constructions of the 'proper' life order (Lesko, 2012). Fundamentally, our understanding of 'normal' orders of life events are shaped by dominant social and political structures in society. As such, the history of colonialism and capitalism in the West acts as a central shaping factor in perceptions of young women and sexuality (Lesko, 2012). Lesko (2012) argues that young mothers are perceived as 'backwards' as they contravene notions of adolescence as a point of societal progress. Her analysis draws on Homi Bhabha's critique of the past/present dialectic in western conceptions of modernity; the view that we in the present must always be more advanced than those in the past (Lesko, 2012, p. 136). She argues that adolescent pregnancy represents a 'disjunctive moment', a cultural event within which the past appears to be attached to the present, rather than progressed beyond (p. 136).

Lesko's (2012) analysis of the historical production of 'adolescence' identifies two central ideas within the problematisation of teenage pregnancy. First, that adolescence as concept

is perceived as emblematic of Western progress, a point of development or 'becoming' (p. 137). This idea draws on imperialist notions that sexuality is the 'hallmark of savages' and as such, the enemy of advancement (p. 137). Second, constructions of adolescence draw on normative life chronologies that situate sexual exploration and childbearing as events that must occur *after* education and career development (Lesko, 2012). This produces the prevalent narrative that teenage mothers are reproducing 'before their time' (Lesko, 2012, p. 135). The imperative to develop a 'proper' education and career can be seen in the constructions of 'Can Do' girls in Harris's (2003) analysis. Middle class girls are mandated to remain sexually unknowing lest it hinder their future career and financial prospects (Harris, 2003). Lesko's (2012) work, when combined with analysis of girlhood in neoliberal structures (Harris, 2003; McRobbie, 2007; Banet Weiser et al, 2020; Rottenberg, 2018), provides valuable insight into how reproductive structures are fundamentally shaped by labour markets. Furthermore, Lesko (2012) demonstrates how colonialist ideas have permeated even the most basic conceptions of adolescence and youth. By highlighting how socio-economic systems manifest in normative ideology, Lesko's (2012) work provides a necessary bolstering to the feminist ethnographic work that makes up the main corpus of this review.

2.6c Notions of Childhood

Building on Lesko's (2012) work, constructions of appropriate adolescent behaviour emerge as a dominant theme in the problematizing of teenage pregnancy within public policy. Fundamentally, adolescence is a relatively modern concept therefore notions of acceptable behaviour are tied up with normative perceptions of childhood (Lesko, 2012). Murcott (1980) offers an analysis of the binary constructions of childhood and adulthood in society that compound this specific problematizing of teenage pregnancy. Sexuality and childbearing are perceived as essentially 'adult' characteristics (Murcott, 1980). In contrast to this, children are understood as innocent, virginal beings; incapable of sexual feelings due to their pre-rational status (Murcott, 1980). This rhetoric underpins the construction of the 'Perfect Girl' in Tolman's (2002) analysis of adolescent girls and sexuality. The 'ideal' adolescent girl is middle-class, white and sexually unknowing as she is fundamentally still perceived as a child. The adult/child binary allows no space for adolescents, those who are

neither child nor adult. As such adolescent pregnancy is understood as 'children having children' (Murcott, 1980). This narrative has been identified by both Pearce (1993) and Phoenix (1993) as a central ideological tenet of the societal rejection of teenage mothers. Employing the essentialised view of childbearing as a fundamentally 'adult' characteristic construes teenage pregnancy as a contradiction in terms - children do not have children (Murcott, 1980). As such, Murcott (1980) argues that the teenage girl's status as a child is brought into question. Building on this, Pearce (1993) highlights how the 1988 Family Support Act in the US attempted to utilise the child status of teenage mothers as a deterrent for adolescent pregnancy, situating them as dependents of their parents, and therefore removing their ability to claim financial aid for their own children.

Constructions of childhood are shown to have a pivotal role in the pedagogy and construction of sex education policy. Jones (2011) highlights how conservative pedagogical perceptions view the child as a romanticised figure of innocence that must be protected. The denial of 'inappropriate' sexual information through censorship and policing is seen as a pivotal tool of protecting children's purity, as such motivating anti-sex education discourse (Jones, 2011). Jones (2011, p. 382) argues that in Western liberal societies, the more common construction of the child in relation to sex education is the 'informed decision maker'. This construction of childhood individualises the sexual decision-making process, providing partial information that children and young people must employ to mitigate risks (p. 382). Both constructions of 'the child' can be seen to inform social approaches to adolescent pregnancy.

Returning to the view of adolescent pregnancy as 'backwards' (Lesko, 2012), young mothers are viewed as innocent, pre-rational beings who must have been corrupted by external influences, thus subscribing to conservative notions of childhood. Conversely, the dominant rhetoric of adolescent pregnancy as lapsed femininity and wasted future (Walkerdine et al, 2001; Harris, 2003) subscribes to a neoliberal construction of young women as informed agents. The individualisation of this problem furthers the demonization of young mothers as it situates young women as *choosing* not to adhere to information or advice. Both modes of childhood fail to recognise the structural and systemic factors impacting sexuality and agency for young women. In my view, this failing can be attributed to the binary conception

of childhood and adulthood in public discourse (Pearce, 1993; Murcott, 1980). Furthermore, it must be recognised that the upholding of young women as children serves to benefit the pervasive socio-economic demonization of teenage mothers in neoliberal societies. By maintaining a rhetoric of 'children having children', young mothers are prevented from developing financial independence, as such bolstering the construction of teenage mothers as 'welfare scrounging' and essentially working class (Walkerdine et al, 2001, p. 189).

Ultimately, analysis of the specific problematisation of adolescent pregnancy bolsters understanding of what constitutes notions of 'correct' girlhood in our society. Whilst adolescent childbearing can present a series of tangible health and socio-economic hinderances (WHO, 2010), it must be recognised that the societal construction of teenage mothers as a 'problem' is fundamentally constitutive to many of these barriers. The construction of adolescent pregnancy as a problem within the binarized context of 'Can Do' versus 'At Risk' girlhoods upholds a narrative of young mothers as individually culpable for their 'lapsed potential'. Fundamentally, neoliberal conceptions of girlhood and sexuality fail to consider the pervasive effect intersecting racial and class-based oppression can have on the enactment of safe-sex and agency (Walkerdine et al, 2001; Tolman, 1994). In turn, this produces a narrative of working class and racially minoritised young women as inherently 'risky subjects', evoking a need for regulatory policy measures. In tandem with the continued infantilisation of young women and the prevalent moral panic drawn from the 'children having children' narrative (Murcott, 1980), young mothers become strung between two aggressive and contradictory discourses. At once, teen mothers and young women who become pregnant are constructed as failed neoliberal agents, suffering at the result of their own poor choices; and as innocent children, who have somehow been corrupted and need protection. Fundamentally, this reveals that our ontological modelling of adolescence in relation to sexuality is deeply flawed and insufficient. This necessitates a critical rethinking of how young women are understood and construed within the policy landscape of RSE.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter has begun to address RQ 2 *What are young women's lived experiences of statutory RSE in Catholic schools?* and RQ 3 *Does RSE delivered in Catholic schools reflect and meet the current needs of young women in England?* by unpacking the relationship between sexual health and education policy and what it means to be perceived and exist as a girl in England. Applying a policy-as-discourse framework (Ball, 1994), this review highlights that our notions and expectations of girlhood are constituted through a network of discourses, within which policy is a central player. This chapter brings into the question the perceived and intended purpose of youth-focused sex education and health policy, examining the regulatory potential of such interventions. Critical attention to the ways in which youth is construed and understood within public discourse illuminates a specific strategy of policy intervention grounded in the mitigation and management of sexual risk. When combined with the prolific narrative of idealised 'Can Do' verses 'At Risk' girlhoods (Harris, 2003), this produces a complex discursive terrain within which young women must come to know and exercise their sexualities.

Examining the critiques of neoliberal conceptions of girlhood, empowerment and success (McRobbie, 2007; Harris, 2003, Walkerdine et al, 2001) against notions of youth sexuality, a dominant expectation for young people – women in particular, to be self-governing and policing emerges. Fundamentally, such narratives erase any consideration of the actual levels of agency and self-actualisation available to young women. As shown by Tolman (1994), Walkerdine et al (2001) Bay-Cheng (2015), expectations of sexual agency and success fail to consider the weight of structural oppression on young women's ability to navigate sexual practice. The concern, as such, is that such discourses become imbedded within the terrain of RSE and sexual health policy, thus constituting working class and racially minoritised young women as 'irresponsible decision makers'. Furthermore, the construction of 'risk' within youth sexual health and education policy necessitates critical attention. The specific problematisation of adolescent pregnancy as an undesired outcome of teen sexuality tends to forgo concern for young women themselves in favour of economic and moral concern as to the societal impact of young parents. This in turn produces policy that again situates young mothers as poor decision makers in need of management. Recognition of these imbedded narratives provides an important contextual foundation from which young women's experiences of sexual landscapes and Catholic RSE provision can

be better understood. Furthermore, it bolsters a critical analysis of the political and ideological motivations behind English sex education policy up to and following the introduction of statutory RSE, as explored in Chapter Three (p. 38).

Chapter Three: Sex Education Policy and Catholic Schooling in England

'When Adam and Eve consented to eat of the tree, did that have good results?' '

(A Fertile Heart, *Year 10 Sample Lesson,* n.d, p.14).

3.1 Introduction

Having established the constitutive role of sex education policy in perceptions and experiences of adolescent sexuality and identity in Chapter Two, critical engagement with the content and political developments of RSE policy is required. Sex education policy in England has undergone several distinct political eras, all of which have produced variations in the status, content and pedagogy of RSE. This chapter will map the central developments in English sex education policy between the Thatcher administration, starting in 1979, and the 2024 general election, with a view to establishing an overview of the political landscape in which the current study of Catholic sex education is situated. In doing so, Chapter Three will substantively address RQ 1 *How do Catholic sexual values intersect with statutory RSE requirements in Catholic schools?* by mapping the surrounding policy landscape in which Catholic and secular RSE operate.

This chapter serves as a secondary literature review, primarily focusing on 'grey' policy literature, with a view to establishing the educational context in which the participants experiences explored in Chapters Five to Seven are set. Section 3.2 will offer a comprehensive timeline of the developments in RSE policy. Within this, I will discuss the relevant political discourse surrounding sex education and adolescent sexuality throughout the different eras of English politics. In section 3.3, I address the policy context for faith schools in relation to RSE and explore points of tension between religious schooling and sex education delivery. Building on this, I establish the unique position of Catholic schools within English sex education policy and examine the intersection of Catholic sexual ethics and RSE

content. Overall, this chapter provides a foundational and overarching backdrop to both the theoretical and practice-based contributions of this thesis.

3.2 The development of sex education policy in England

Figure 1 offers a visual chronology of the central policy developments leading to and proceeding the introduction of statutory RSE. This illustration aims to provide a concise overview of the political conditions that made possible the intersection of Catholic belief and statutory sex education content in English schools.

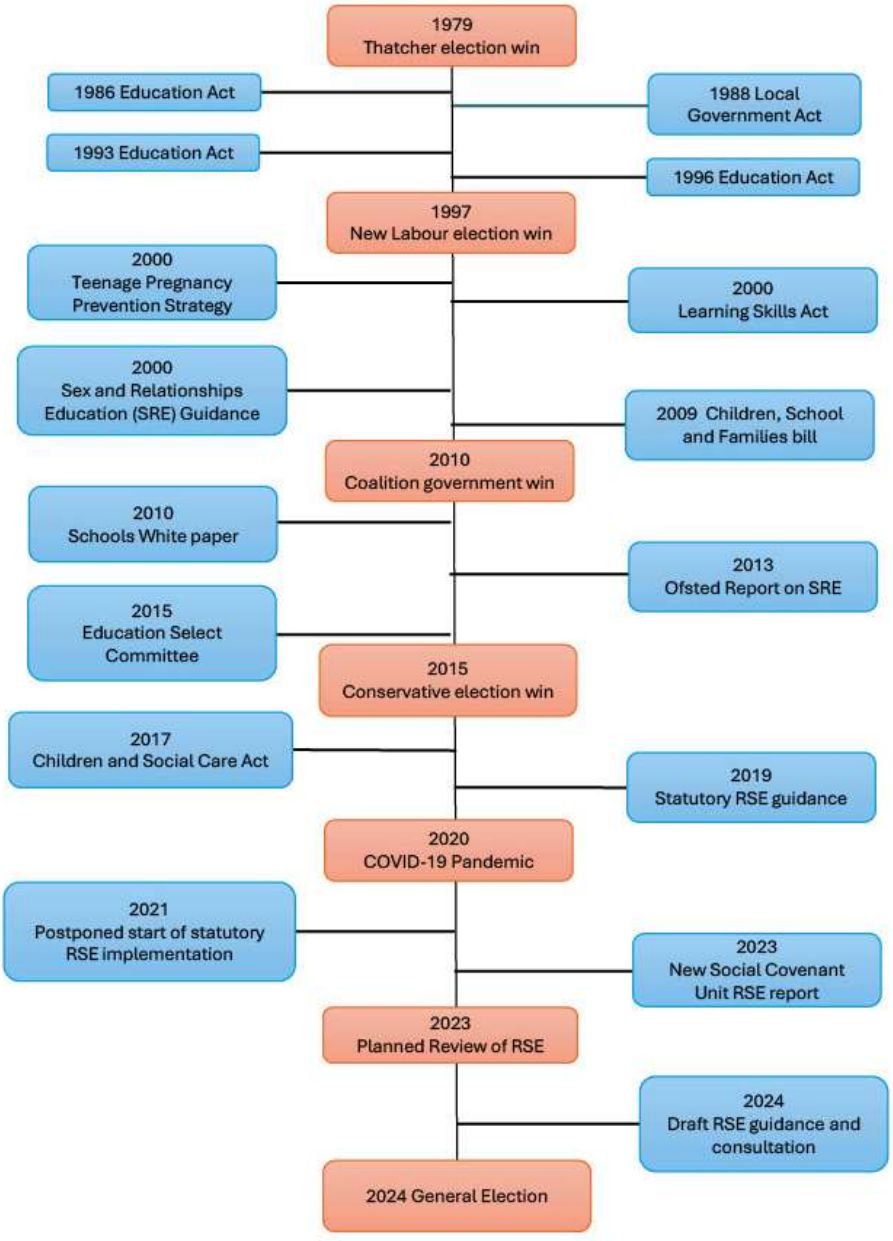


Figure 1: Policy Map of RSE developments in England 1979-2024.

Key pieces of legislation and documents which have shaped the direction of RSE policy are shown in the external columns in blue. Key socio-political events, namely impactful general elections that accord with these legislative developments, are shown in the central column in red. As the following sections will address, this figure demonstrates that sex education policy in England is an explicitly political venture, hinged not only to the ideologies and aims of various governments, but also to a complex network of legislation and socio-political events.

3.2a Family Values: Thatcher and Sex Education

Policy concerning sex education provision in English schools is a relatively recent phenomenon. The 1986 Education Act, enacted by the Thatcher administration, represents the first instance of centralised national policy surrounding the provision of sex education in British schools (Alldred and David, 2007). Whilst in a contemporary context, this reads as an incongruously progressive policy decision, Alldred and David (2007) argue that in actuality the act reflects a positioning of sex education as a vehicle to impart and uphold conservative 'family values'. This is substantiated by Moore's (2012, p. 30) argument that sex education during this period was explicitly involved in the 'explicit validation of heterosexual, monogamous, married relations', a response to the increasing sexual liberalism of the 1970s. Similarly, Johnson (1996) argues that the increase of legislative interest in sex education from Conservatives during this period was largely a response to left-wing local authority activity within education, which saw a rise in gay and lesbian inclusion and equal opportunity content. Under the 1986 Education act, control over the specific content of sex education policy was given to school governing bodies, instead of local authorities, and strong emphasis was placed on parental 'opt-out' rights (Alldred and David, 2007; Education Act, 1986; Johnson, 1996).

This legislation was shortly followed by the 1988 Local Government Act (c.9, p. 27), which implemented Section 28, which prohibited the promotion of the 'acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship' in education settings. Johnson (1996) highlights that this policy sought to reinforce an oppositional binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality, with the latter constructed as a threat to family life.

Section 28 was repealed in 2003, but it's legacy of repressing and marginalising LGBTQ+ identities has had a sustained impact on the cultural discourse surrounding sexual equality in the UK, and in turn negatively shaped the experiences of LGBTQ+ teachers and pupils who endured that era of British schooling (Lee, 2019). The manipulation of sex education as a vehicle for heteronormative social conservatism under Thatcher serves as a clear articulation of Irvine's (2004, p.10) situation of sex education as a site of 'discursive politics'. This analysis provides an essential lens through which to view the subsequent developments in English sex education policy, leading to the implementation of statutory RSE in 2020.

Further developments took place under the Major administration (1990-1997). The 1993 Education Act (c.35, section 241) was significant in shaping sex education as a discrete subject, distinct from other areas of the curriculum. The act stipulated that it must include teaching on HIV/AIDs and other STIs, yet curiously also emphasised parental rights to withdraw their children from all sex education content, beyond teaching on human reproduction within the National Science Curriculum (Education Act, 1993, c.35 section 241). Furthermore, the act detailed that all content on HIV/AIDs and other non -biological aspects of human sexuality be stripped from the science curriculum (Education Act, 1993, c.35 section 241). School governors were required to provide a written policy on the delivery of sex education with their school (Alldred and David, 2007).

As argued by Harris (1994), the focus on HIV/AIDs education and enhanced definitions of sex education as a subject appear incongruous with the weighting placed on parental rights within the Act. Fundamentally, it appears that the delineation of sex education as a subject 'in it's own right' (Moore, 2012, p. 30) may have in fact served to bolster the ease with which parents could withdraw their children from any content deemed unsuitable. During this period, Johnson (1996, p.169) argues that friction began to emerge between the 'moral authoritarianism' of the Conservative government and the 'Public Health Pragmatism' approach adopted by Department of Health and increasing efforts to improve sexual health nationally. In particular, Moore (2012) argues that the removal of HIV/AIDs from the National Science Curriculum was, in part, due to conservative protests in response to the mention of anal sex within some coverage of HIV prevention. The construction of sex education as a defined entity continued within the Education Act 1996 c.56 (section 352)

following the introduction of The National Curriculum, with it being listed as part of the 'basic' curriculum, and with HIV/AIDs education re-constructed as a statutory entitlement for 11-16 year-olds. Crucially, Moore (2012) emphasises that this did not constitute a statutory requirement for comprehensive sex education provision, but rather the prevention of STIs becoming an embedded part of English schooling. Overall, Major oversaw significant developments in the constitution of sex education as a stand-alone subject, but also a reinstating of ultimate parental rights to prevent children receiving such content. Both areas of change have held long-lasting implications for the policy and delivery context of English sex education, as explored in the following sections.

3.2b 'Education, Education, Education': Sex Education Under New Labour

In 1997, New Labour's sweeping general election win, coupled with their promise of 'education, education, education' posed a hopeful new era for sex education in England (Alldred and David, 2007, p.28). The principle focus on New Labour's agenda was eradicating social exclusion, and throughout their 13 years in power, sex education became a pivotal tool in this mission (Alldred and David, 2007). Moore (2012) argues that for many, the rise of New Labour was viewed as potential route back to a more radical agenda of sex education, such as the liberal and critical movements beginning to develop in the 1970s (Jones, 2011). This is supported by Monk (2001, p.271) who highlights that the labour win 'raised the hopes' of sex education and sexual health advocates who had long argued for the provision of sex education in tune with young people's needs. For Moore (2012), these expectations were sadly unmet, with the Blair administration failing to adequately disrupt or challenge the approaches coined by the previous governments.

Three policy ventures can be seen to define this era of English sex education: the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (TPS) (2000), the Learning and Skills Act (2000), and the Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) Guidance (2000). New Labour were determined to reduce teenage pregnancy rates in the UK, which were the highest in Europe by the end of the 1990s (Connolly et al, 2014). This initiative was situated as part of their aims to reduce 'social exclusion', which had become somewhat of a mission statement of the Blair government (Moore, 2012). As shown in section 2.6a (p. 39) of the previous chapter,

adolescent pregnancy under New Labour was specifically problematised as a cause of economic dependency and academic failure, thus representing a catastrophic outcome for young women (Pearce, 1993). As such, young women's sexual behaviour, and potential resultant pregnancies, became understood within policy contexts as a 'risk factor' for social exclusion (Alldred and David, 2007). Establishing a target to halve teenage pregnancies rates by 2010, the Social Exclusion Unit developed the TPS, with one of the core recommendations being the improvement of sex education delivery (Alldred and David, 2007). This rhetoric was strongly reflected in the eventual SRE guidance published in 2000. Allred and David (2007) identify a clear discursive shift within the guidance, demonstrating a move away from the prohibition of contraceptive advice under Thatcher's 'family values' approach, to a definitive promotion of contraception as a means to reduce adolescent pregnancy. Thus, whilst the legal status of English sex education might well have stagnated in this period, New Labour's approach undeniably produced a significant and enduring shift in the ideology surrounding the subject.

Moore (2012) critiques the Learning and Skills Act (2000) which prescribed a sustained focus on the family and continued emphasis on parental withdrawal rights within SRE. Interestingly, Lewis and Knijin (2002, p.683) describe these messages as an attempt to appease and engage right-wing critics of sex education, deeming them 'the most traditional moral clauses to date'. Furthermore, Lewis and Knijin (2002) highlight the retainment of Section 28 (until 2003), despite significant will within the party to remove it, as a signifier of the power exerted by traditionalists in parliament during this time. As argued by Monk (2001, P.271), this further demonstrates sex education as a site of 'highly politicised struggles' at the end of the 20th century, characterised not only by conflict between central and local government, but also between the moral traditionalist right and health experts. Notably, Moore (2012) neglects specific focus on the advent of the 2000 'Sex and Relationships Education Guidance'. I find this unusual as this guidance defined the scope, priorities and delivery of sex education in England for two decades – and clearly highlights the political motivations surrounding New Labour's approach to SRE. Lewis and Knijin (2002) highlight that this guidance was markedly more progressive in nature than the approach adopted by the prior Conservative governments. Moore's (2012) choice to focus on the Learning and Skills Act (2000) might reflect the fact that the SRE guidance made very little

change in terms of the statutory framework surrounding sex education. Beyond requiring school leadership and governors to take the guidance into consideration, the legal duties of schools remained largely the same as under the 1986 act (Monk, 2001). Thus, leaving the design and scope of sex education provision, outside of content included in the National Curriculum, to the discretion of governors and head teachers (Monk, 2001). As Monk (2001) argues, situating the guidance as part of the National Curriculum would have been the easiest route to ensure consistent provision across the country, however, the fact it still remained outside of it demonstrates the sensitive political status of sex education during this time.

Monk (2001) highlights the value of the guidance in situating SRE within the broader context of PSHE and citizenship, highlighting that prior to this much of the inconsistency in sex ed delivery could be attributed to the lack of defined space within the curriculum. Although still non-statutory, the lens of PSHE provided more of a defined subject space for SRE delivery, and for the first time, meant schools had a national framework to guide delivery within which the SRE guidance could be utilised (Monk, 2001).

Interestingly, the 2000 SRE guidance is arguably where we see the beginnings of the current approach to faith schools in English sex education policy. The guidance states that 'schools with a religious character may choose to reflect that in their sex and relationships education policy' (Department for Education and Employment, 2000, p.8). Notably, as highlighted by Monk (2001) this statement offers no guidance as to how religious schools ought to navigate teaching issues such as same-sex relationships, to which their faith may be explicitly opposed. Monk (2001) continues that such ambiguity in relation to faith schools creates space for 'unbalanced' approaches to SRE delivery across the sector. As I argue in section 3.3 (p. 69), the responsibilities of faith schools continue to be defined in ambiguous terms in relation to statutory RSE. Overall, faith schools were left somewhat in the lurch as to the extent of their SRE provision duties, and as I outline in the latter sections of this chapter, this enabled the design and implementation of distinctly religious models of sex education across some English schools.

Towards the end of New Labour's time in power, some significant attempts at SRE policy change were made, however, due to both political resistance and poor timing, little was actualised (Wilkinson, 2017). In 2008, following a review of sex education delivery and a report delivered by the UK Youth Parliament, the Education Minister announced the government's intention to make PSHE and SRE part of the National Curriculum (Wilkinson, 2017). These plans were later enshrined in the Children, Schools and Families Bill (2009), aiming for SRE to become statutory from 2011 onwards with the stipulation that parental withdrawal rights be maintained, but only until a child's 15th birthday. Unfortunately, as Wilkinson (2017) highlights, progression of the bill was halted by the 2010 election, and eventually, the clauses added by the Labour government were removed by Conservative peers. Whilst statutory status was not achieved at this time, research by Formby et al (2011), commissioned by the Labour government as part of the proposed reforms, was still published after the Coalition win. The report highlights the need to improve fragmented approaches to PSHE across English schools, a need for enhanced practitioner CPD opportunities, enhanced curricula support for both primary and secondary schools, and a need to engage pupils in PSHE planning and evaluation (Formby et al, 2011). This demonstrates that the case for statutory SRE has been long-established within the policy sphere. Despite this, it would be a decade before statutory RSE was actualised (Department for Education, 2019a), preceded by a period of policy in-action under the coalition government.

3.2c Stagnation and Resistance 2010-2017

The coalition win meant a sharp end to the burgeoning developments made in SRE policy under New Labour. Looking at Wilkinson's (2017) work, this stagnation in policy delivery could be attributed to fundamental differences in political understandings and approaches to sex education between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservative party. Wilkinson (2017, p.612) argues that the Liberal Democrats shared the philosophy of 'protection through SRE' upheld by New Labour. This position constituted SRE as a means to empower young people to make safe, informed decisions via the provision of knowledge (Wilkinson, 2017). This echoes the neoliberal pedagogy highlighted by Jones (2011, p. 378), as addressed in section 2.3 (p. 24), which constructs children and young people as 'informed

decision makers', placing emphasis on their individual ability to mitigate risk using knowledge provide by adults.

Conversely, Wilkinson (2017, p.612) argues that the Conservative majority within the coalition adopted a view that SRE constituted a threat to childhood innocence, from which young people must be protected. This perspective acted as a rationale for continuation of the non-statutory position of SRE, situating comprehensive sex education content as sexually graphic and 'age-inappropriate' (Wilkinson, 2017, p.612). Notably, as I will address in section 3.2e, this stance also prevails in more recent Conservative rhetoric surrounding RSE policy in England (Adu and Adams, 2023). Returning to Jones (2011), the Conservative majority's approach accords, unsurprisingly, with a conservative pedagogy that perceives sexual knowledge as a corrupting influence, bound to encourage unwanted experimentation, and thus as something to be quashed. As highlighted in Chapter 2 (section 2.5, p. 30), this perspective reflects a fundamental understanding of childhood and sexuality as mutually exclusive concepts, constructing children (and thus adolescents) as inherently virginal, innocent and asexual (Murcott, 1980). This is substantiated in Wilkinson's (2017, p.612) testament that the Conservative party's approach viewed young people as 'devoid of any sexual self'. As such, the co-governing parties find themselves entirely at odds, with vastly divergent conceptions of the role SRE can and should play in young people's development. In turn, the coalition term in office saw very little material change in the quality and status SRE.

The Schools White Paper (Department for Education, 2010) set out the Coalition agenda for education, largely focusing on providing schools with greater autonomy by allowing them to convert to academies. This paper also highlighted the intention to conduct an internal review of PSHE delivery (Department for Education, 2010). The paper states the intention behind the review is to 'determine how we can support schools to improve the quality of all PSHE teaching, including giving teachers the flexibility to use their judgement about how best to deliver PSHE education' (Department for Education, 2010, p.46). However, given the upcoming publication of the independent report commissioned by New Labour (Formby et al, 2011), it would appear that this review served to challenge the SRE agenda established by the previous government. The government presented the results of the internal review in

March 2013, concluding that PSHE and SRE would remain non-statutory subjects yet funding would be provided to the PSHE association to assist their work supporting schools in delivery (Long, 2015). Notably, this conclusion appears to be in tension with the findings of the Ofsted (2013) report, published in May of the same year, which raised significant concerns about the quality of SRE delivery across English primary and secondary schools. The Ofsted report (2013) found that SRE delivery required improvement in over one third of schools, and overall PSHE delivery was insufficient in 40% of schools. Whilst the recommendations do not include a change in statutory status, they emphasise a need for the DfE to provide clear messaging to schools around the importance of PSHE delivery (Ofsted, 2013). Government response to the report, when prompted in the House of Lords, was minimal and merely asserted the need for schools to heed Ofsted's advice (Long, 2015). Overall, this further demonstrates the Coalition government's resistance to act on mounting evidence that SRE provision in England required change.

Following the Ofsted report, external political pressure to reform SRE grew significantly, with opposition MPs proposing an amendment to the Children and Families Bill to ensure the provision of SRE to all children and young people in June 2013 (Long, 2015). Whilst the bill was defeated in parliament, several Conservative MPs and the Liberal Democrat deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, were outspoken in the press about the need for significant SRE reform during this period (Peacock, 2013; Burns, 2013). Long's (2015) standard note provides excellent documentation of these developments, showing a clear discursive shift surrounding SRE amongst the centre-right of the English political establishment. This shift cumulates in the cross-party Education Select Committee inquiry into PSHE (House of Commons Education Committee, 2015), which concluded that both PSHE and SRE should be granted statutory status across both primary and secondary schools. The committee report includes the caveats that statutory approaches ought to have 'minimal prescription content' and that existing parental withdrawal rights must be retained (House of Commons Education Committee, 2015, p.3), perhaps suggesting a more 'watered down' approach than that suggested by New Labour. Furthermore, the committee also recommended a title change to 'Relationships and Sex Education' as this would more accurately describe the content of current delivery (House of Commons Education Committee, 2015). Interestingly, the Catholic Education Service (CES) are cited as one of the key advocates of this name

change and are quoted as arguing that the new title would 'show the importance of relationships as the starting point for education in human love and sexuality' (House of Commons Education Committee, 2015, p.44). The title change is further indicative of the discursive shift occurring during this period. In shifting the emphasis away from sex itself, it appears that a more politically palatable version of statutory sex and relationships education is born.

The government response to the inquiry report, published by the new Conservative government after the 2015 election, again failed to commit to statutory RSE (Department for Education, 2015). However, unlike the rebuttal of proposals in 2013, the official response appears much more receptive to progressing PSHE policy reform, stating:

> *'We now want to go further and will take forward work with the sector to develop further measures to improve the quality of PSHE. We want to make significant progress on this issue this parliament, and will consider in full the arguments put forward by the Select Committee as part of this work before reporting back later this year.'* (Department for Education, 2015, p.9).

Despite this, the government reaffirmed the decision to maintain the non-statutory status of PSHE and SRE again in February 2016, with then Education Secretary, Nicky Morgan, asserting that statutory status would not necessarily improve consistency in provision (Long, 2023, p. 30). By September, however, the government position appears to change. Long's (2023) updated briefing paper provides an insightful mapping of this progression, highlighting the appointment of Justine Greening as Education secretary as a pivotal factor in the changing approach. In a U-turn move, Greening reported to the Education Committee that she would be open to reconsidering the status of PSHE and RSE (Long, 2023). By the following year, Greening announced amendments to the Children and Social Care Act (2017) that would make the provision of relationships education in all primary schools, and RSE in all secondary schools, a statutory requirement from September 2019 (Greening, 2017; Wareham, 2022). The changes were included under Section 34 of the act (Children and Social Care Act, 2017), but did not become legally enforceable until September 2020 (Long, 2023).

Whilst this move appears to represent a radical shift in the Conservative's approach to relationship to sex education, it is crucial to note that the willingness to engage in such policy reform comes as a result significant external pressure. Notably, Greening's initial announcement to the House of Commons Education committee (2016, Q.226-227) of her intent to improve RSE provision cites the Women and Equalities Committee (WEC) (2016) report into sexual harassment in schools as a principle motivation. The WEC report (2016), echoing it's 2023 follow up (Women and Equalities Committee, 2023), highlights the need for an urgent national solution to the widespread and imbedded culture of sexual harassment, bullying and misogyny in UK schools. Principally, the report argues that access to high-quality RSE is key in tackling this issue, and that implementing the subject at a statutory level is the *only* route to ensuring consistency (Women and Equalities Committee, 2016). Furthermore, the work of third-sector campaigners pushing the case for statutory sex education throughout this period must not be understated. From 2014 onwards, the Sex Education Forum ran the 'It's My Right' campaign demanding the introduction of statutory SRE, backed by the National Union for Students and the UK Youth Parliament (Sex Education Forum, n.d). This was coupled with letter-writing campaign to MP candidates in the run up to the 2015 election and several high-profile press articles, attempting to solidify statutory SRE's presence on the next political agenda (Sex Education Forum, n.d.).

The PSHE Association also were instrumental in shaping this shift in Conservative policy approach, criticising the government's failure to act on the Education Committee's initial recommendation for statutory RSE and PSHE in 2015, and the subsequent failure to respond meaningfully to the WEC report in 2016 (Baggaley, 2016). This consistent pressure meant that the Conservatives could no longer justify their prior approach of inaction. With significant evidence demonstrating the increasing need for statutory measures, failure to respond with policy change became untenable, even from a right-wing perspective. Beyond external pressures, it is worth unpicking the internal conditions within the Conservative party that made the U-Turn on statutory RSE permissible.

Greening's move was rendered possible by attempts between 2010 and 2017 to develop a more 'progressive' front of British conservatism, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality. Notably, Greening was, at the time, the first openly LGBTQ+ woman within a

Conservative cabinet, having publicly come out in 2016 (Gayle, 2016), a feat unthinkable under the 'family values' governance of the Thatcher era (see section 3.2a, p. 50). Furthermore, under Cameron, the party had begun to more vocally uphold a commitment to 'gender equality', albeit a highly individualised, neoliberal version of such, with increased selection of women electoral Candidates and elected MPs at both the 2010 and 2015 election (Campbell and Childs, 2018, p.193). Campbell and Child's (2018, p.193) argue that this era marked a process of 'feminisation' within the party, that is the integration of women and women's 'concerns' into party structure and policy. Policy offerings 'for women' in 2015 centred on issues such as childcare and the prevention of violence against women and girls (VAWG), which Campbell and Childs (2018) situate as an attempt to integrate a liberal feminist positionality into the Conservative sphere. Whilst not directly positioned as 'for women', statutory RSE was arguably contextualised within this policy umbrella, in part, due to the focus on its preventative capacity for VAWG in schools (Women and Equalities Committee, 2016).

This trend of 'feminised' British Conservatism continued with Theresa May becoming the second woman Prime Minister in 2016, infamously photographed wearing the Fawcett Society's 'This is What a Feminist Looks Like' T-shirt the same year (Campbell and Childs, 2018). This era is one of the clearest articulations of 'corporate friendly' feminism with UK politics, as described by Banet-Weiser et al (2020) (see section 2.5a, p. 32), focusing on the visibility of women within already dominant economic spheres. This is what Rottenberg (2018) describes under the term 'neoliberal feminism', highlighting the focus on middle class women's ability to maintain career development and have a family – or 'have it all'.

Neoliberal feminism rapidly gained mainstream traction in the 2010s, with high-profile, successful women – from then Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg to Beyoncé – espousing a new feminist positionality (Rottenberg, 2018). As argued by Banet-Weiser et al (2020, p.8), this 'palatable and legitimate' wave, with its focus on economic ambition, self-care and 'balance', led to a new-found and wide-spread proliferation of feminism within mainstream Western culture. In turn, as highlighted Dikwal-Bot and Mendes (2020), a new expectation for public figures, politicians included, to acknowledge and embrace the feminist label emerged, which is arguably evidenced in the Conservative party during this time. It is,

however, crucial to acknowledge that this era of was also marked by a determined and relentless regime of economic austerity (Pashkoff, 2014). This led to a significant and disproportionate impact on women, through the decimation of public sector budgets, leading to job losses and renewed pressure on unpaid care work, and slashes to welfare benefits, which women are more likely to claim than men (Pashkoff, 2014). In turn, 'feminised' Conservative leadership led to rapid deterioration of material conditions for working class, racially minoritized and disabled women. This reveals the core limitations of neoliberal feminism, in that the focus is explicitly on individual economic capacity and success, not on the transformation of existing structures. Fundamentally, understanding the evolution of gender politics in the public sphere through the works described above is a crucial step in understanding how statutory RSE became a salient Conservative government policy and aides understanding of the discursive landscape that has surrounded the policy implementation in the following years.

3.2d Delayed Implementation and COVID-19

On the 18th of March 2020, in response to the growing COVID-19 crisis, UK schools were closed 'until further notice' to all children, with exception to the especially vulnerable and children of key workers (Johnson, 2020). This was shortly followed by the first of a series of intermittent national lockdowns, which collectively would extend until March 2021 (Institute for Government, 2022). Within this period, schools were subject to a seemingly ever-changing policy landscape, resulting in vastly inconsistent educational provision throughout this period (Timmins, 2021). Initially, learning largely moved into a remote format, yet this provision was highly sporadic across the country (Howard et al, 2021). From the autumn of 2020, schools were re-opened with the introduction of socially distanced learning and year group 'bubbles', only to close again, returning to remote learning in January 2021 (Howard et al, 2021; Timmins, 2021). In turn, this period had a profound impact on the wellbeing and engagement of pupils (Elliot, 2021; Colao et al, 2020) and teachers (Kim and Asbury, 2020) alike.

Naturally, the changing landscape of education during the height of the pandemic had significant implications on the delivery of RSE. In an attempt to reconcile the mounting pressures on schools, the Department of Education released a statement in July 2020 (Long, 2023), allowing schools to postpone the implementation of the statutory RSE guidance until the summer term of 2021. Notably, this decision substantiates Heyes (2020) prediction that schools time and resources would likely be diverted towards 'core' subjects (i.e. English, Maths, Science) as a result of COVID-19. Research is largely yet to capture the ongoing impact of this shift on the quality and experience of RSE in English schools. Horan et al (2023) offers one of the only current empirical works on this topic, presenting data from 16 teachers who delivered RSE during the pandemic. The study found that teachers struggled to adapt RSE to virtual formats as schools shifted to online learning in 2020, largely due to a perceived need for in-person rapport with the class, safeguarding concerns of discussing sexuality in the home, and disparate pupil access to technology (Horan et al, 2023). Further, as Heyes (2020) hypothesised, increased focus on post-lockdown 'catch up' learning within core subjects lead to a de-prioritisation of RSE within schools, despite it's statutory status, resulting in less timetabling space and support for RSE (Horan et al, 2023). The participants highlighted that COVID had worsened staff retention issues and lockdowns, combined with self-isolation periods, lead to prolonged and sporadic staff absences, leading to shortage of staff available to deliver RSE. Finally, Horan et al (2023) found that staff perceived significant developmental delays and behavioural issues for children entering secondary school during and following COVID-19. In turn, this effected young people's abilities to develop and maintain personal relationships, and their engagement in lessons (Horan et al, 2023).

3.2e A New Era? Challenges to RSE 2023-2024

In 2023, the Department for Education announced that the review for statutory RSE scheduled to take place later that year was to be brought forward by several months (Department for Education, 2023a). This development materialised within a climate of increasing fearmongering from conservative political groups surrounding the potential for 'sexualisation' and 'indoctrination' within existing RSE delivery (Cumper et al, 2023). Namely, the problematisation of RSE during this period was fuelled by a report commissioned by former Conservative MP, Miriam Cates, and published by the New Social

Covenant Unit (NSCU), a Conservative, Christian thinktank. The report was prompted by Cates accusation that independent RSE providers were enabling 'age-inappropriate, extreme, sexualising and inaccurate' material to be taught in schools (Adu and Adams, 2023). The report argues that RSE facilitators demonstrated '*poor judgements about what is age appropriate, legally accurate, ethically sound, developmentally safe or culturally acceptable to British families'* and had inappropriately introduced topics such as BDSM, anal sex, sex toys, and pornography (NSCU, 2023, p.86). Further, the authors state that LGBTQ+ identities are granted a 'disproportionately dominant place in the curriculum', and trans identities are 'promoted' to children and young people (NSCU, 2023, p.82). The planned review was subsequently reframed by government as a direct response to Cates and the NSCU report (Department for Education, 2023a; Setty et al, 2024).

The NSCU report has been widely discredited within the RSE field due its reliance on anecdotal and sensationalised claims, and failure to acknowledge a wealth of academic evidence that counters the issues raised (Setty et al, 2024; King-Hill, Gilsenan and Stander, 2023). Further, Marshall (2024) argues that Cates and NSCU's use of highly emotive and fearmongering language speaks to broader moral panic surrounding LGBTQ+ inclusive RSE, echoing that of the moral panics explored by Stanley Cohen (2011) in the 1960s. Public anxiety has been further stoked by sensationalised media headlines and 'moral entrepreneur' groups, such as religious or parental groups, who position themselves as 'custodians of societal values' through campaigns against perceived deviations from traditional values (Marshall, 2024). As a result, it is arguable that the planned review of statutory RSE became imbued with anxiety-driven discourse surrounding the need to protect childhood innocence, drawing on conservative constructions of childhood as outlined in section 2.6c (p. 43).

The review concluded in May 2024 with the release of updated draft RSE guidance, that is, at the time of writing, in the public consultation phase (Department for Education, 2024a). The proposed guidance includes the introduction of age-limits on certain topics to prevent young people being introduced to potentially 'distressing' topics 'too early' (Department for Education, 2024a, p.12). The limits include:

- In primary schools; no content on puberty and/menstruation, and no sex education content, including within the remit of the national science curriculum before Years 4 and 5 respectively.
- In secondary schools; no references to 'sexually explicit materials', including the risks of using pornography, no discussion of sexual and domestic abuse, and no content on STIs and contraception prior to Year 9.

Further, the draft guidance states that children and young people should be taught that at school 'boys cannot be legally classified as girls or vice versa', as 'gender identity is a highly contested and complex subject' (Department for Education, 2024b, p. 12). This reflects the government's sustained efforts to roll back the rights of trans and gender non-conforming young people, and the increasing societal discrimination of faced by trans people in the UK (Marshall, 2024).

Emerging responses from third-sector stakeholders and researchers highlight several significant issues within these proposed changes. Failure to address sexual abuse and violence until well-into secondary schools may seriously impinge upon opportunities for prevention and early-intervention in these areas (King-Hill and McCartan, 2024). Further, the age-limits may have serious implications for sexual health outcomes for young people, particularly surrounding the prevention of STIs (Emmerson, 2024; Brook, 2024). Finally, the attempt to eschew teaching on gender identity risks intensifying the prolific violence, prejudice and subsequent mental health outcomes experienced by LGBTQ+ young people (Hengstwerth and King-Hill, 2024; Brook, 2024). Overall, it is evident that the 2024 draft guidance presents a dangerous, discriminatory ill-informed approach to RSE. The draft guidance consultation closed on the 11th of July (Department for Education, 2024a), the week after a new Labour government were elected. As such, it is currently unclear whether the proposed changes will be actioned (Whannel, 2024). Since the election, Starmer's government have faced growing pressure from RSE stakeholders to dispose of the Conservative's draft guidance and begin the RSE review process from scratch (Whittaker, 2024).

3.2f Whose Voice Matters? Statutory Policy Design

Following the 2017 announcement, the Department for Education (2018) opened a Call for Evidence, with dual adult and young person surveys surrounding appropriate content for statutory guidance which concluded in February 2018. Draft guidance was then released for public consultation in July of 2018 (Long, 2023). The Department of Education (2019b) response to the Call for Evidence reveals a striking disparity in response numbers between the young person survey (2,323 responses) and the adult survey (15,528 responses). Similarly, young people comprised only 2% of responses to the draft guidance consultation, compared to parents who made up 31% of total respondents, outweighing both teachers (8%) and other organisations (3%) (Department for Education, 2019b). This stark disparity raises some notable questions regarding the extent to which youth input was actively sought across both consultation exercises.

The DfE response have not provided details of their recruitment and engagement strategies, meaning it is difficult to ascertain government willingness to engage with young people. However, Setty and Dobson (2023) identity considerable reason for scepticism towards the DfE's approach to youth consultation. Namely, that many of the responses were likely not submitted by young people. Of the 180 non-redacted responses received, 62 included coordinated anti-LGBTQ+ campaign responses, all including the statement '*I do NOT want homosexual lessons in Relationship or RSE. I want to WITHDRAW from both. I will NOT go to school if homosexual relationship is taught*' (Setty and Dobson, 2023, p.1651). Setty and Dobson (2023) argue that many of the campaign respondents appear to have misrepresented themselves as young people, evidenced by failure to select a school stage when prompted, or selecting multiple school stages. They also highlight the unlikelihood of the 58 responses claiming to be from primary school students, given that the questions were not adapted to be understood by young children (Setty and Dobson, 2023). This becomes highly problematic in that the scale and content of young people's true involvement is potentially obscured (Setty and Dobson, 2023). Building on this, Setty and Dobson (2023) highlight that the DfE's (2019b) consultation response makes no attempt to disaggregate young people's responses from the other findings, which limits the scope of meaningful engagement with youth perspectives.

Children's right to be consulted on policy that effects them is enshrined within Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), adopted by the UK in 1991, and is embedded in the Children's Act (2004) and Education Act (2005) (Setty and Dobson, 2023). Whilst from a legal perspective, the DfE may have technically adhered to their responsibilities within the draft consultation, Setty and Dobson (2023) question the quality and impact of the exercise. Lundy (2007) highlights the UK's poor historical record of putting their UNCRC commitment into practice. In 1995 and 2002, the UNCRC periodic report found a systematic failure to consult children and young people within UK policy development, particularly around issues such as sex education and school exclusions (Lundy, 2007). As such, the 2002 report concluded that the UK government should '*take further steps to promote, facilitate and monitor systematic, meaningful and effective participation of all groups of children in society, including in school, for example, through school councils'* (UNCRC Periodic Report, 2002, p.7) . Developing this recommendation further, Lundy (2007) proposes four key elements that policy makers must make available in order to avoid tokenistic approaches to upholding Article 12, as shown below.

Table 3: Key Elements of Youth Participation

Four Elements of UNCRC Article 12 Provision
• Space: Children must be given the opportunity to express a view • Voice: Children must be facilitated to express their views • Audience: The view must be listened to. • Influence: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate

(Adapted from Lundy, 2007, p.933)

Similarly, Bragg (2010, p.26) offers a set of questions for policy makers and education practitioner to ensure 'meaningful and effective' consultation with young people:

> *'is the focus too wide to lead to specific actions, or too narrow to seem worthwhile and significant? Does it give young people a genuine role? How open-ended are the outcomes, or are they already confined to a choice between a narrow range of options?'*

Utilising Bragg (2010) and Lundy's (2007) frameworks from an analytic perspective, significant gaps emerge in the RSE consultation exercises employed by the DfE. In particular, Setty and Dobson (2023) invoke Bragg's perspective, arguing that the questions used in the draft guidance consultation were far too broad to lead to specific actions, and that there was limited scope for young people's responses to change the course of the guidance. Using Lundy's (2007) framework, this would constitute a failure to provide opportunity for influence, and thus a failure to genuinely uphold Article 12 of the UNCRC.

The draft guidance consultation appears to further fail to meet the provision of 'voice' (Lundy, 2007), in that there is little to no evidence of direct facilitation of young people's views specifically. The formulation and expression of children's 'voice', according to Lundy (2007), will sometimes depend on the support from others. The nature of this support will vary depending on ages, ability and environment. Lundy (2007) highlights suggestions made by children and young people themselves, at the 2002 UN Summit on Children's Rights, including the provision of sufficient time to understand the issues and access to child-friendly versions of documents and information. Whilst, as Setty and Dobson (2023) highlight, the initial call for evidence was closer to best practice in that it provided a specific young person's survey, with questions tailored to younger audiences, the draft guidance consultation (Department for Education, 2018) did not provide information or questions tailored to children and young people. There was no 'child-friendly' version of the draft guidance provided, and much of the content within the document may have been inaccessible for younger children and teenagers. This appears to also be the case for the current consultation survey, in which no alternative questions or documents are offered for young people (Department for Education, 2024a). Furthermore, it appears that no specific efforts were made to engage young people and children (i.e. working with schools or youth organisations). Whilst many youth organisations conducted their own youth consultations before submitting their responses, which may have used more appropriate engagement strategies (Setty and Dobson, 2023), there is no evidence that the DfE actively sought and facilitated young people's input.

Utilising Lundy's (2007) further, the DfE also failed to adequately provide an 'audience' for youth perspectives. Article 12 of the UNCRC includes the stipulation that children's views

are given 'due weight', which Lundy (2007, p.937) argues includes the implicit stipulation that their views are listened to, and thus, given an audience. Concerningly, the DfE's response to the draft guidance consultation (Department for Education, 2019b) contains a stark lack of evidence of active listening and engagement with young people's views. Coll et al (2018, p.158) argue that listening within in youth consultation should be done with the explicit purpose of effecting change on the basis of what is heard, not merely as a 'gesture'. This is substantiated by Bragg (2010) who advises that, even where action is not immediately possible, effective youth consultation demands a response. In the case of youth policy consultation, it is therefore the duty of the government to demonstrate that young people's views are heard and considered. This appears to be glaringly absent in the draft consultation response (Department for Education, 2019b). This is evidenced in the homogenisation of adult and young person responses in the presentation of consultation findings (Setty and Dobson, 2023). In failing to differentiate young people's responses from adult responses, the DfE fail to enter direct dialogue with children and young people regarding the guidance. Whilst the DfE response does list changes made to the guidance as a result of the consultation, it is entirely unclear which changes were specifically advocated by young people, and not by parents, teachers or other adults (Department for Education, 2019b). As such, young people's views are lost within the findings, with no clear record of how their particular input shaped the guidance. Overall, the DfE's approach to youth consultation with regard to statutory RSE leaves much to be desired. In failing to adequately facilitate, listen to and act upon youth perspectives on the statutory guidance, youth consultation is rendered to a largely tokenistic gesture.

Analysis of the notable failures in youth consultation during the development of statutory RSE offers some initial insight into RQ 3 *Does RSE delivered in Catholic schools reflect and meet the current needs of young women in England?* It might be claimed that the ability of *any* school to meet and reflect the needs of their students within RSE is, to a certain extent, constrained by guidance that was produced without substantive or meaningful engagement with young people. In turn, it is arguable that the prevalent theme of feeling unheard and misrepresented by adults, as expressed by the young women participating in the current study (section 7.4b, p. 248), is compounded by broader structural failures outside the remit of Catholic schools specifically.

3.3 Contextualising Statutory RSE in Catholic Schools

3.3a RSE requirements in English faith schools

Like all other secondary schools in England, faith schools have been legally mandated to adhere to the statutory RSE guidance since 2021 (Department for Education, 2019a). This marked a significant departure from the prior legal requirements of the National Science Curriculum and STI education (see section 3.2a, p. 51). Whilst the 2000 SRE guidance made the teaching of faith-values within sex education permissible, the remit of English faith schools' duties regarding sex education had remained largely undefined for several decades (Department for Education and Employment, 2000; Monk, 2001). Examining the 2019 guidance, it appears that ambiguity surrounding faith schools and sex education provision persists. The guidance states that:

> *'Schools with a religious character may teach the distinctive faith perspective on relationships, and balanced debate may take place about issues that are seen as contentious. For example, the school may wish to reflect on faith teachings about certain topics as well as how their faith institutions may support people in matters of relationships and sex'.* (Department of Education, 2019a, p.12).

Interestingly, the 2024 draft guidance adds the following sentence to the discussion of faith school requirements: '*However, where RE is delivered in conjunction with RSHE, schools should ensure that content is differentiated for pupils so that it is clear where they are being taught content that reflects religious belief.'* (Department for Education, 2024, p. 13).

Neither set of guidance offer indication as to which specific topics may be deemed 'contentious'. Further, information on how faith perspectives should be integrated into lessons whilst adhering to statutory content is extremely limited, beyond stating that schools should ensure topics are 'appropriately handled' and comply with the Equality Act 2010 (Department for Education, 2019, p.12). It is also notable that all school are permitted to work with external agencies and/or facilitators and use resources they assess to be suitable for the age and developmental needs of their students, so long as examples are shown to parents during consultation (Department for Education, 2019a). As such, religious

organisations are permitted to produce and deliver RSE content and materials – as shown by the Catholic resources explored in section 3.3d (ii) (p. 78).

It is also pertinent to note that the treatment of religious perspectives in relation to RSE in England is vastly different to that of European countries. In Ireland, despite over 90% of primary schools and 50% of secondary schools being under the jurisdiction of the Catholic Church (Griffin, 2019), proposals to move from 'regard for the characteristic spirit of the school' towards 'evidence informed health education' have been considered since 2021 (Wareham, 2022). Interestingly, Wales has recently followed the lead of Germany and Denmark, mandating an 'objective, critical and pluralistic' approach to RSE, offering a standard RSE Code, and removing parental withdrawal for all schools including those of a religious character (Welsh Curriculum and Assessment Act, 2021). As such, the allowance of religiously motivated RSE delivery in England may result in significantly disparate experiences for young people in different areas of the UK. Overall, the persistent ambiguity surrounding RSE requirements for English faith schools creates space for notable inconsistencies in the quality and content of RSE provided to young people in England. As such, the content and delivery of RSE in Catholic schools emerges as a ripe area of investigation.

3.3b Tensions between faith and RSE

In this section, I explore the central issues emerging from the intersection of faith perspectives and school-based RSE. This discussion aims to engage with and build upon Wareham's (2022, p. 708) critique of faith-based 'carve outs' resulting from the 2019 guidance, as she offers one of the only substantive and pressing critiques of the current policy climate surrounding English faith schools and RSE. Wareham (2022, p.708) argues that-based 'carves out', allowances made surrounding the religious character of schools, may lead to disparity in the quality of RSE available to children and young people. In allowing RSE framed within the 'distinct religious character' of the school, Wareham (2022) emphasises that space is created for the omission of key topics, and the maintenance of harmful and potentially pseudo-scientific narratives. She offers as case study of the controversy surrounding the use of the Catholic RSE programme 'A Fertile Heart' in a school

in Hereford, which I will address more substantively in section 3.3d (ii) (p. 78). 'A Fertile Heart' was found to promote misogynistic sexual scripts and harmful, medically inaccurate narratives surrounding contraception, and was eventually condemned by Ofsted and senior government ministers (Wareham, 2022). Despite this, the school's leadership, and the Archdiocese of Cardiff (under whose jurisdiction the school fell) appeared to situate the resources as falling within the remit of 'balanced debate' on the contentious issues, as allowed by the statutory guidance (Wareham, 2022). The provision of caveats that enable RSE content driven, in this instance, by conservative Catholic ideology speaks to a significant failure of the intended project of statutory RSE. As demonstrated in section 3.2c (p. 58 onwards), the 2019 statutory RSE guidance was framed as an attempt to universalise the provision of sex education across English schools and improve consistency. As argued by Wareham (2022, p. 717), it appears to argue that 'access to the goods offered by RSE should not be restricted by the type of school a child attends'. Yet, as demonstrated by the uptake of resources such as 'A Fertile Heart', the allowance of faith-driven 'carve outs' results not only in RSE that is potentially harmful, but also in RSE is, crucially, still extremely inconsistent across differing school contexts.

Wareham (2022) also highlights case studies of across Charedi Jewish schools in London, and a primary school in inner-city Birmingham as further examples of the consequences of faith-based allowances. In both instances, parents rejected the LGBTQ+ inclusive content within sex education, resulting in widespread parental withdrawal of pupils across Charedi schools, and a series of high-profile protests within Muslim communities in Birmingham (Wareham, 2022). In both cases, religious objection to homosexuality was constructed as a rationale to inhibit the information offered to children and young people within RSE (Wareham, 2022). The backlash against LGBTQ+ inclusive RSE content, particularly in the context of primary schools, was also reflected by the Partnership for Jewish Schools, the Association of Christian Teachers and the Vatican (Savage, 2019). Bialstock and Wright (2017) and Shipley (2015) highlight a similar backlash to LGBTQ+ sex education in Ontario, Canada, principally lead by Catholic and Muslim parent groups. In both contexts, it is notable that the much of the media coverage of this backlash focused on protests lead by Muslim communities (Henry, 2022; Bialstock and Wright, 2017). This reflects an overarching tendency to construct religious parents as 'illiberal minorities', who constitute a threat to

LGBTQ+ inclusion or reproductive rights (Phillips et al, 2023, p.4) – a rhetoric I suggest is likely more pronounced when directed at racially minoritized communities. As such, it must also be acknowledged that religious community views on inclusive RSE are diverse and heterogenous – and many religious parents were supportive of the policy changes (Phillips et al, 2023). Yet, as Wareham (2022) argues, the maintenance of policy that enables children to be withdrawn from inclusive sex education on religious grounds constitutes a significant threat both to the consistency of RSE provision, and to the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ children within those communities.

A growing body of work advocates for 'faith sensitive' approaches to RSE as a means of acknowledging the needs and perspectives of diverse faith groups, whilst maintaining a commitment to comprehensive RSE. This approach describes 'working with' religious diversity within RSE, rather than constructing faith as an obstacle (Phillips et al, 2023, p.2). Sell and Reiss (2022) argue that, outside of faith schools, religious identity is rarely handled in an affirming and sensitive way within RSE, owing to a notable gap in resources and training available to staff. Shuker et al (2021) also highlight that where teachers did attempt to include faith-perspectives, their approaches often lacked nuance or made students of faith feel singled out and exposed. As such, faith-sensitivity is positioned as a means to reassure and engage parents and students from communities that may have previously felt alienated by RSE content (Sell and Reiss, 2022). Phillips et al (2023) argue that, as a post-secular approach, faith-sensitive education implicitly recognises that students may approach subjects through a religious lens. They argue that a faith-sensitive approach to RSE might entail:

- Creating space to reflect on the ways our faith and/or culture shape our views of sex, relationships, and bodies.
- Reaching out to parents
- Avoiding stereotypes and assumptions about 'normal' sexual behaviours that may alienate young people of faith.
- Providing unconscious bias training for staff.
- Visibility of teachers from diverse faith backgrounds.

Notably, faith-sensitivity is distinct from faith-orientated approaches to RSE – such as the Catholic approaches outlined in section 3.2d (ii) (p. 78). Phillips et al (2023) argue that religious perspectives should be acknowledged without making sustained references or specific truth claims about any one faith. Further, they argue that faith should be treated as equal to, and not above, other protected characteristics such as sexuality, gender reassignment, race, and disability (Phillips et al, 2023). This is echoed by Sell and Reiss (2022) who highlight that teaching must ensure that minoritized students are not further marginalised by faith content. This is substantiated by Wareham's (2024) argument that faith-sensitive RSE must also remain student-sensitive by maintaining awareness of the overarching 'educational goods' provided by RSE. Such goods include the ability to treat others as equals and the ability to make autonomous decisions about one's sexual health (Wareham, 2024). As such, good RSE will make clear that faith-perspectives on issues such as LGBTQ+ identity and contraception are not 'the only game in town' (Wareham, 2024, p. 137).

It is, however, important to note that the adoption of faith-sensitive approaches to RSE does present some notable challenges. It requires teachers to facilitate complex discussions, that may evoke controversial and potentially uncomfortable questions and responses from students (Sell and Reiss, 2022). As explored in sections 5.4 (p. 153) and 7.2a (p. 214), teacher comfort is a prevalent barrier to existing RSE delivery, even without the addition of theological debate. Further, teachers report existing workloads, the 'second subject' status of RSE, and a stark lack of supportive resources a key barrier (Phillips et al, 2023, as also explored in Chapter 5 (section 5.5, p. 161). Additionally, students reported a preference for RSE delivered by external organisations in this context, which may be financially costly (Shuker et al, 2021).

3.3c Understanding Catholic schooling in England

Grace (2002) argues that it is erroneous to assume that the issues, policies and experiences of Catholic education pertain to only Catholics. In much of Europe and New Zealand,

Catholic schools receive a significant degree of financial support from public funds (Grace, 2002). As such, in many contexts, Catholic schools are recognised and integrated aspects of public education systems (Grace, 2002). The image of Catholic schooling is markedly different in the US, whereby Catholic schools are run privately, therefore upholding cultures and structures different to those found in the American public school system (Grace, 2002). With this in mind, this section aims to offer a concise outline of the aims, status, and structures surrounding Catholic schooling in England.

Grace (2002) argues that a central purpose of the Catholic school is to keep the sacred alive within a secular world. Catholic schools were, in their original founding, constituted as 'citadels and fortresses', with the aim of preserving the faith amidst a hostile environment imbued with the rise of Protestantism and secularism (Grace, 2002, p. 7). The Catholic Education Service (2014, p.2) the central body for Catholic schooling in England and Wales state that Catholic education aims to '*support Catholic parents in their responsibility for the academic, physical, spiritual, moral and religious education of their children in accordance with the teachings of the Church'* and *'to make the person of Jesus Christ known and loved, and to place Him and the teachings of the Catholic Church at the centre of the educational enterprise'.*

Catholic schools became 'voluntary aided' in 1944, thus meaning they could retain their distinct religious ethos whilst being part of the state-maintained system (Catholic Education Service, *A Brief History of Catholic Education in England and Wales,* n.d). The state funds 90% of running costs for voluntary aided schools meaning that the Catholic church supports the remaining 10% of costs for Catholic schools (Catholic Education Service, *FAQs,* n.d). Further, the Church owns the land and buildings of all English Catholic schools. The 90% of state funding is obtained through local authorities, for traditional maintained schools, or increasingly, directly from the central government as part of Catholic multi-academy trusts (CMATs) (Holy Family Carton School, 2019). At the time of writing there are 2,169 Catholic primary and secondary schools, academies and colleges in England and Wales (Catholic Education Service, *FAQs,* n.d).

Catholic schools are overseen, both administratively and in terms of educational approach, by Catholic Education Service teams in each diocese (Catholic Education Service, 2014). A diocese is a regional jurisdiction led by a bishop or archbishop: there are 22 in total across England and Wales (Catholic Education Service, 2014). Whilst Catholic schools are accountable to the Department for Education, facilitated through Ofsted's Section 5 inspections, they are also accountable to their diocese through section 48 inspections (Archdiocese of Birmingham, 2018). Section 48 inspections aim to assess the quality and extent of 'Catholic life' within the schools, which largely encompasses the school ethos, religious education provision, and collective worship (Archdiocese of Birmingham, 2018). Notably, this may also encompass some RSE content, as will be explored in the next section.

Catholic school communities do not comprise solely of those who identify as Catholic. The CES highlight that around 40% of staff and 40% of pupils within Catholic schools are non-Catholic (Catholic Education Service, *FAQs*, n.d.). Notably, whilst for the majority of positions, staff are not required to be Catholic, some Catholic schools also stipulate that RE should be only delivered by practising Catholics, and the CES mandate that certain SLT positions such as the Head of RE and Headteacher must be held by practicing Catholics in order to maintain the religious identity of the school (Catholic Education Service, *Religious Education in Catholic Schools,* n.d, accessed 05/24b). The extent to which Catholic RSE can engage and support young people across multiple faith and cultural backgrounds is an increasingly pertinent question, particularly considering the CES' recent assertion that Catholic schools are some of the most diverse in England (Catholic Education Service, 2023). While Catholic schools are broadly exempt from the 50% cap on religious admissions placed on religious free schools due to their voluntary aided or converter-school status (Academies Act 2010, School Admission Code, 2021) they are required to employ traditional catchment-based admissions where pupil places are undersubscribed. It is therefore important to recognise that Catholic schools maintain responsibility to support students from different religious affiliations.

3.3d Catholic sexual values and RSE

3.3d (i) Catholic Sexual Ethics and Women's Sexuality

Understanding the specific implications of RSE delivered from a 'distinct faith perspective' (Department for Education, 2019a, p. 12) within Catholic schools first requires exploration of the sexual values and ethics upheld by the Catholic church. My engagement with Catholic sexual ethics is significant premised on Ruether's (2000; 2008) work as she offers a unique and in-depth theological analysis of Catholic scripture and ideology from a feminist perspective. This lens is seldom represented in theological and sociological research, and represents an important starting point for my critique of the intersection of Catholicism and RSE, and its subsequent effects on young women.

The Catholic Church teaches that heterosexual marriage is only permissible context for sexual activity. Catholic sexual ethics necessitate that every sexual act must remain 'open to life giving potential' (Bailey and Wilmott, 2022). This implies the rejection of contraception, and the 'goodness of sexual pleasure for its own sake' (Ruether, 2000, p. 46). Furthermore, Catholic theology constructs human life as beginning at the moment of conception, and therefore prohibits women accessing abortion and emergency contraception (Ruether, 2008). Ruether (2000) highlights that within the Catholic tradition, celibacy is in fact constructed as holier than reproductive sexuality. In turn, married couples were historically expected to 'sublimate their sexual urges through prayer as much as possible' and abstain from sex both before and after having children (Ruether, 2000, p. 46). This view was softened somewhat during the 20th century, with the Church permitting 'natural' family planning, colloquially referred to as 'Vatican Roulette' (Ruether, 2000, p.46). This approach, now more commonly known as the 'rhythm' or 'fertility awareness' method, necessitates only engaging in sex on days on less fertile days of the menstrual cycle and is identified as the least reliable form of contraception (NHS, 2024). As explored in section 3.3d (ii) (p. 78), this approach is currently advocated for within commonly used Catholic sex education resources (Ten:Ten, n.d.) Notably, even with the acceptance of natural family planning, non-penetrative sexual acts still remain suspect within Catholic sexual ethics, which feminist theologians have argued is symptomatic of systemic attempts to subjugate women's sexual pleasure (Jung, 2000).

Catholic sexual theology is also premised on deeply patriarchal, essentialised gender-ideals. As argued by Ruether (2008, p. 184) 'Roman Catholic Christianity has a problem with women'. The Augustinian theological roots of Catholicism dictate that from their origin, women were subordinate to men (Ruether, 2008). Women were, historically, expected to remain subjugated, obedient to their husband and the clergy (Ruether, 2000). This prescription is rooted in the biblical view of women, represented by Eve, as responsible for the original sin of eating forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden (Ruether, 2000). While The Vatican has increasingly allowed women into senior administrative roles, Pope Francis has continuously reasserted the prohibition of women as religious leaders within the Church (Caldwell, 2022).While the Vatican has attempted to modernise its position on gender relations, asserting the 'equal dignity of men and women' (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2019, p.9-11), it has also reinforced the 'natural reciprocity' and 'biological order' between these groups. Further, the Vatican positions the family unit as the 'natural social unit which favours the maximum realisation of the reciprocity and complementarity between men and women' (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2019, p.20). In turn, womanhood is understood as a biologically ordained, fixed, and necessarily heterosexual identity. Further, Vraney (1981) argues that the prominence of The Virgin Mary within Catholic iconography and ideology also equates female virtue with virginity and chastity, presenting Joseph and others' veneration of Mary as contingent on her celibacy. In turn, for the 'good Catholic girl', sexual expression and faith are constructed as mutually exclusive concepts (Jung, 2000, p.40).

Notably, feminist therapeutic literature (Mahoney, 2008; Ogden, 2008) highlights that Christian 'abstinence until marriage' narratives absorbed during childhood can have a profound impact on women's sexual wellbeing later in life, regardless of whether they choose to follow the teaching or not. For those that choose to disavow such teachings, engaging in sex can result in a 'psychological tug-of-war' as they attempt to reconcile their actions and desires with the voices of religious authority (Mahoney, 2008, p. 97). For women who do remain abstinent until after marriage, post-marital sex may still evoke feelings of guilt and shame due to its association with perceived immorality (Ogden, 2008).

Furthermore, Vraney (1981) argues that the idealisation of pre-marital chastity may severely compound feelings of guilt for Catholic survivors of sexual violence.

The prescription of procreative sex as the only morally permissible form of sexual expression within Catholic theology also presupposes the admonishment of LGBTQ+ relationships. Henry (2024, pp. 11-12) argues that the Catholic Church continues to condemn homosexuality through three vehicles; biblical scripture (including Leviticus 18:22 '*thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind')*, Magisterium teachings (the Church's religious teaching authority) which posit homosexuality as 'intrinsically disordered', and the perception of shared moral values amongst Christian people. A shift towards LGBTQ+ inclusion has also been noted in the approach of the Vatican itself, with Pope Francis' recent declaration of 'who am I to judge?' in reference to LGBTQ+ relationships, and the permission of Catholic blessings of same-sex partnerships (Henry, 2024). However, as Henry (2024) argues, it is notable that these wider discursive shifts within Catholicism have not been matched by any changes to official doctrine by the Magisterium (religious teaching authority). This creates a difficult ideological position for younger, more liberal Catholics to reconcile, including the participants in this study (see section 5.4, p. 154 onwards).

3.3d (ii) Catholic RSE Content and Resources

Having established the basic tenets of Catholic sexual ethics, this section will now explore the nature and content of Catholic RSE through discussion of three central providers of Catholic RSE resources. The CES (*Relationships and Sex Education,* n.d.) provide a comprehensive set of free RSE training, guidance, and resources – including model policies and curricula – for both primary and secondary schools. As the leading administrative and monitoring body for Catholic schools in England and Wales (see section 3.3c, p. 75), CES resources form the foundation of RSE for the majority of English Catholic schools. The CES (*Relationships and Sex Education,* n.d.) highlight that RSE represents a key 'part of the mission of Catholic schools to educate the whole person'. The CES (2019) emphasise a need for RSE to be progressive, therefore build upon previous learning, and to be delivered across the whole-school curriculum. In turn, it adopts widely acknowledged best practice in these areas (Pound et al, 2017). The model curriculum for secondary schools, covering KS3 to KS5,

is driven by three themes; Created and Loved by God, Created to Love Others, and Created to Live in Community – Local, National & Global (CES, 2019). In other terms, this can be understood as the self, personal relationships, and society. Catholic sexual ethics underpin many of the key learning outcomes throughout the curriculum, including learning the difference between 'natural' and 'artificial' contraception (p.3), the importance of marriage as the 'foundation for society' (p. 7), and recognising that intercourse should be delayed until marriage (p. 3) (CES, 2019). Notably, however, the curriculum is extremely comprehensive, and also covers issues such as FGM, bullying, forced marriage, consent, healthy relationships, discrimination, and STIs (CES, 2019). It also includes explicit references to homophobia, transphobia and sexism (CES, 2019, p.11).

Ten:Ten, a Catholic education resource company founded in 2007, offer multi-media RSHE packages to primary and secondary schools through the 'Life to the Full' programme. Their resources are used in over 80% of Catholic schools across England and Wales (Ten:Ten, secondary school programmes 2024-2025, n.d). The name 'Ten:Ten' refers to the gospel passage from John 10:10 'I have come that they may have life, life to the full' (Ten:Ten, About Us, n.d.). The secondary school package offers 7-14 lessons per year group, from years 7-11. The organisation works collaboratively with the Catholic Education Service to facilitate accredited staff training on delivering their resource package, which the RE department in School B undertook in 2020. The organisation situates the 'Life to the Full' package as fulfilling 'all statutory Relationship, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) requirements, within the context of a Christian understanding of human sexuality' (Ten:Ten, secondary school programmes 2024-2025, n.d). Ten:Ten's resources are behind a paywall, therefore it is not possible to provide a substantive analysis of their curriculum and student resources within this study, however, a promotional video listed on the website highlights that 'Life to the Full' builds on 'two millennia of Catholic teaching and wisdom' which 'at times will be counter cultural' (Ten:Ten, n.d, *why it's needed,* 00:51). The video also references the 'pandemic' of pornography, race and gender inequality, and growing mental health issues amongst young people as the key rationale behind the resources (Ten:Ten, n.d. *why it's needed* 00:14). Blog posts produced by the company also reveal that Ten:Ten substantively focus on Natural Family Planning (NFP) as the only theologically permitted

form of contraception, owing to the Catholic definition of 'true love' as open to the 'life giving potential' of marital sexual union(Bailey and Willmott, 2022).

The final Catholic RSE provider I wish to highlight is A Fertile Heart, who in my view represent the most problematic intersection of Catholic sexual ethics and sex education. A Fertile Heart was created in 2019 under the Archdiocese of Cardiff and was originally used across all schools within the diocese (Wareham, 2024). As highlighted in section 3.3b (p. 70), A Fertile Heart was eventually denounced by Schools Minister, Nick Gibb (2021), due to its alarmist, gender-stereotyping, and medically inaccurate content. The secondary school in Hereford, within which concerns were first raised about the resources (Humanists UK, 2021), was subject to a rapid Section 8 Ofsted inspection, within which SLT told inspectors they had adapted the language in response to concerns around the presentation of gender roles (Wareham, 2022). Despite media and political condemnation, A Fertile Heart continues to operate to this day, and according to their website, is currently used across four countries (A Fertile Heart, 2022). Sample content from their Year 10 curriculum includes a lesson PowerPoint on 'Sexuality and Relationship with God', and includes a 16-year old YouTube video espousing the value of chastity and modesty for young people (A Fertile Heart, *Year 10 Sample Lesson,* n.d). The slides also states that consent between partners does not make sex 'right', and consent from God should be forefront within sexual decision making, providing the prompt question, and prefacing quote of this chapter - *'when Adam and Eve consented to eat of the tree, did that have good results?'* (A Fertile Heart, *Year 10 Sample Lesson,* n.d, p.14). Utilising Wareham's (2024) argument surrounding the preservation of key educational goods facilitated by RSE, it is arguable that A Fertile Heart's resources continue to risk compromising core outcomes of RSE. In centring God's consent, over one's own, A Fertile Heart demonstrably inhibits the educational good of autonomy (Wareham, 2024). Overall, it is concerning that resources that have been publicly identified as likely highly incompatible with statutory RSE requirements (Gibb, 2021), and potentially represent a threat to some of the core benefits of the subject. remain available and in use across England.

3.4 Conclusion

Chapter Three principally sought to offer preliminary insight into to RQ 1 *How do Catholic sexual values intersect with statutory RSE requirements in Catholic schools?* by, first, mapping the socio-political and legislative context and development of statutory RSE, and second, outlining the policy and theology underpinning Catholic sex education. In section 3.2 (p. 49), I addressed the first aim by offering a comprehensive genealogy of English sex education policy between the Thatcher government of 1979 and the newly elected Labour government of 2024. This chronology of policy developments demonstrates the changing political conditions that have, at varying points, catalysed or hindered the introduction of statutory RSE. Principally, analysis of this policy journey constructs RSE as an intrinsically political endeavour and demonstrates how the content of and rhetoric surrounding RSE is contingent on wider political discourses and agendas. Having established the role of sex education policy and discourse in shaping understanding and experiences of girlhood in Chapter Two, examining the political journey of RSE offers an important contextual background for analysing young women and their teacher's experiences and perceptions of RSE, as explored in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven. In section 3.3 (p. 69), I outlined RSE requirements for faith schools in England, and highlighted notable moments of tension between conservative faith communities and inclusive RSE delivery. Following this, I provided a concise exploration of Catholic sexual ethics, and explored the contents of RSE resources commonly used in English Catholic schools RSE by both statutory policy and religious sexual values. This provides a substantive foundation from which to better understand Catholic schools' approaches to RSE and supports identification of potential areas of tension between statutory content and Catholic sexual values.

Chapter Four: Designing A Phenomenological Feminist Method for Research with Young People

'*The researcher who asks herself at the inception of a research project the following questions is asking about the ontological and epistemological foundations of her work: How can I best capture the complexities and contradictions of the worlds, experiences, or texts I am studying? Whose voice will/does my research represent? Whose interests will it serve? How can I tell if my research is good research?*' (Strega, 2005, p. 199).

4.1 Introduction

Chapter Four principally serves to address the key questions outlined by Strega (2005) above. In doing so, this chapter aims to explore the central methodological and philosophical decisions made within the present study, and outline how these intersect with the overarching ethos of feminist research. In section 4.2, I outline the feminist orientation of the work and explore what it means to conduct 'feminist research' with young women. Following this, in section 4.3, I offer a comprehensive discussion of the ontological and epistemological paradigms employed within my research, outlining the central tenets of constructivism, feminist standpoint theory, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. In section 4.4, I illustrate the qualitative research design employed within the present study, focusing on the rationale for using focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Following this, in section 4.5, I outline and discuss Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis processes and the subsequent implications for research design. Lastly, section 4.6 offers a comprehensive discussion of key ethical challenges and considerations for conducting sensitive research with young people and explores how these were mitigated within the present study.

4.2 Characteristics of Feminist Research

4.2a Research *by* or Research *for* Women? Defining Feminist Research

Before outlining the methodological underpinnings of this thesis in more detail, it is first worth exploring what exactly 'feminist research' refers to, and the implications it may have for research design decisions. Feminist research is a well-established facet of the academy,

covering a plethora of disciplines and subject matter. This breadth means that drawing definitive boundaries around what it means to conduct 'feminist research' can be challenging (Campbell and Wasco, 2000). Caution must be exercised to avoid the implication that only certain topics and methods can be delineated as 'feminist'. This view is upheld by Harding (1987) and Devault (1996) who reject the notion of a singular mode of feminist inquiry. Instead, feminist methodological literature proposes a focus on *shared characteristics* of impactful feminist work, rather than the establishment of rigid defining boundaries (Devault, 1996; Harding, 1987; Campbell and Wasco, 2000). These shared characteristics are critically explored below.

Feminist research offers an uncovering of previously unarticulated aspects of human experience (Thompson, 1990; Long in Reinharz, 1992; Leavy and Harris, 2018; Kelly et al, 1994). The fundamental role of feminist work is the revelation of gender oppression and the surrounding social structures. As argued by Marshall (1999, p. 6) the experiences of gender oppression are largely 'nuanced and subtle', thus feminist research plays an important role in making such experiences visible. This was particularly apt in the early developments of second wave feminist scholarship, when so much of women's experiences remained unexplored (Maynard, 1994). To Harding (1987), focus on women's experiences offers a 'renewed purpose' for social research. This is what Hesse-Biber (2014) refers to in the construction of feminist research as a prioritisation of 'women's issues'. However, I fear this definition may be too limiting as it fails to account for the systemic impact of gender on society as a whole.

Building on this, the integration of traditionally excluded sources of knowledge is also a constitutive aspect of meaningful feminist work (Black in Reinharz, 1992; Jaggar, 1989. Devault, 1996; Harding, 1987). Historically, Western, positivist scholarship has sought erase human bias and emotion from knowledge production (Jaggar, 1989). Harding (1987) argues that traditional modes of knowledge production, and thus dominant understandings of the world around us, are rooted in patriarchal social structures. In turn, feminist research situates women's' emotions and experiences as an alternative epistemic source (Harding, 1987; Jaggar, 1989). Black (In Reinharz, 1992, p.3) defines feminist research as that which includes 'subjectivity and personal experience', again challenging positivist dominance in the

realm of knowledge production. The relationship between feminist epistemology and mainstream approaches to knowledge production are explored more substantively in section 4.3b (p. 89). Overall, effective feminist research appears to represent some level of disruption to traditional scientific method, in that relative, experiential and embodied knowledge is not 'put aside' (DeVault, 1996, p. 39).

For others, the capacity to evoke change is the central defining feature of feminist work. Kelly et al (1994, p. 28) argue that the primary aim of feminist research is to 'create useful knowledge […] which can be used to 'make a difference'. This argument intersects with a more disputed characterisation of feminist research as inherently liberatory. This is predominantly referred to as 'consciousness raising' (CR), describing the process of women's liberation through collective sharing and meaning making of gendered experiences (Naples and Gurr, 2014). I approach the capacity for CR within feminist research somewhat cautiously. The drive for structural or conceptual change is what differentiates feminist research from research simply *about* women. However, the implication that feminist research necessarily liberates women or even 'makes a difference' potentially ignores the weight of material barriers facing the people effected by the phenomena we, as feminist researchers, examine (Strega, 2005). This tension is explored more in section 4.4c (ii) (p. 112).

Lastly, meaningful feminist research seeks to avoid the replication of harmful social hierarchies within the process of knowledge production (DeVault, 1996; Maynard, 1994; Campbell and Wasco, 2000). There is a long history of exploitation within the academy and many marginalised groups have been subjected to gross abuses of power under the guise of 'research' (Leavy and Harris, 2018). As such, Leavy and Harris (2018) argue that feminist research practice ought to reflect a commitment to social and political justice. Thus, whilst there might not be a singular method of feminist inquiry there are distinct ethical and practical implications as to the conduct of feminist research. Devault (1996) highlights a focus on 'levelling' hierarchies between researchers and participants as a core factor within feminist research, necessitating a heightened focus on power discrepancies within knowledge production. Within efforts to shift power dynamics within research, reflexivity has become a key guiding principle for feminist scholars (Leavy and Harris, 2018). Reflexivity

asks the researcher to 'situate her personal, political, intellectual, theoretical and autobiographical selves' throughout the research process, as examining the impact of positionality and relation to social structures on the researcher-researched relationship (Carroll, 2012, p. 550). This represents a radical move away from the 'value-free' research historically revered in positivist research, towards a 'conscious-subjectivity' (Skeggs, 1994, p. 80). Overall, meaningful feminist research can be characterised by a heighted awareness of the power structures surrounding the process of inquiry, and how, in turn, this may impact participants.

This research adopts a feminist orientation through the 'uncovering' of young women's lived experiences of faith and sexuality discourse within the RSE classroom. As will be explored throughout this chapter, the philosophical paradigms employed within this thesis implore a recentring of the epistemic sources used to inform RSE guidance, particularly in relation to faith schools. Whilst RSE policy discourse highlights the importance of the subject in bettering young women's experiences in society (Department for Education, 2019; Women and Equalities Committee, 2023), the majority of decisions surrounding its design and implementation occurred without meaningful engagement with young people, as explored in section 3.2f (p. 65 onwards). This failure in consultation arguable compounds the sense of alienation and disconnect with RSE content expressed by the young women in this study in Chapter Seven (section 7.2, p. 214 onwards). In adopting an explicitly feminist methodology, this study challenges the historic marginalisation of young women's voices and lived experiences by situating them as key epistemic sources for the investigation of the efficacy and impact of English statutory RSE policy in Catholic schools.

4.2b Feminist Research in Practice

As established in the prior section, meaningful feminist research is characterised by the adoption of a radically reflexive approach. This necessitates the examination, rather than eradication, of 'difference' within research relationships (Skeggs, 1994). Difference, in this context, refers to what Arendell (1997, p. 343) denotes as researcher's 'baggage' – the weight of personal identity, positionality in relation to social structures and experience which inevitably shapes research interactions and outcomes. Crucially, Arendell (1997, p.

343) highlights that within interview research particularly, the self is 'the primary research instrument' – therefore close examination of one's own positionality and 'baggage' is necessary. This notion rejects 'hygienic' approaches to research, so often seen in positivist approaches, a refusal to gloss-over the complexity and confusion of interpersonal research (Kelly et al, 1994). Fundamentally, it is the consideration of personhood as a salient factor within the production of knowledge.

In practice, reflexivity represents more than 'reflecting' on the impact of researcher positionality, but rather it is an active form of continuous self-critique and political awareness (Linabary and Hamel, 2017). Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) offer four levels of critical analysis necessary within feminist reflexivity, as shown below:

Table 4: Reflexive Considerations for Social Research

1. Identification of the exercise of power, power relationships and their effects in the research process.
2. The particular theory of power that enables a particular conceptualization of power relations (hidden or otherwise) in this instance.
3. The ethical judgements that frame the research and mark the limits of shared values and political interests. (This also requires reflection on any possible harm that could come from the research and how this should be avoided.)
4. Accountability for the knowledge that is produced. This includes reflections on what community of knowers (epistemic community) the researcher produces knowledge within , why researchers tell some stories rather than others, and how their knowledge is authorized.

Adapted from Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002, p.119)

Thus, reflexivity is presented as an iterative process, entangled throughout the research process as a whole. Reflexivity necessitates inwards reflection on our own social positionality and identity in relation to participants. There is some discussion of the value of 'woman-to-woman' research within feminist scholarship, which as Reinharz (1992) argues may facilitate enhanced reciprocity and empathy within the research process. However, I am wary of the essentialising potential of this rhetoric. As argued by Riessman (1987, p. 191) 'gender is not enough' to assume understanding between participant and researcher. Riessman (1987) offers a case study of white, middle-class female researcher interview two

other women; the first, a middle-class, white woman, and the second, a working class, Puerto-Rican woman named Marta. Whilst both participants gave extensive, detailed accounts, the interviewer often appeared to miss the meaning, narrative or timeline conveyed by Marta (Riessman, 1987). Riessman (1987) argues that the interviewer held onto 'white, middle class temporal organisation' and lacked understanding of the cultural signifiers Marta presented in her discussion. The author argues that a male Puerto Rican researcher may have been able to facilitate a more congruous conversation with Marta, due to shared understanding of the cultural landscape surrounding her experiences (Riessman, 1987). However, Riessman (1987) argues that the *ideal* interviewer would have been a Puerto Rican woman, who could grasp both gendered and cultural signifiers within Marta's narrative. This case study demonstrates that the researcher's positionality within white, middle-class structures hindered the opportunity for Marta to be heard and understood. In turn, this brings the legitimacy of any authoritative claims made from the 'knowledge' produced from the interview.

Fundamentally, Riessman's (1987) work demonstrates how researcher positionality can affect the 'two-tiered layers of meaning' in participant-researcher interactions (Hesse-Biber, 2014,p. 190). This refers to the process of interpretation between what is actually *said,* and what the researcher perceives that to mean (Hesse-Biber, 2014). In essence, Hesse-Biber (2014) refers to the interaction between researcher positionality and the 'hermeneutic circle' of continuously interpretation and meaning making within research relationships (Tuohy et al, 2013) . This is of particular importance considering the epistemic application of hermeneutic phenomenology within this thesis, as explored in sections 4.3b (ii) and 4.3b (iii) (p. 94 onwards). Overall, failure to adopt an inwards reflexive approach within research dynamics runs the risk of erroneously 'speaking for' participants. In working with adolescent women as an adult, this is a risk I have been particularly conscious of throughout conducting the research for this thesis. This explored more substantively in the following section.

Consideration of researcher positionality raises significant questions about insider/outsider status within feminist research. Riessman's (1987) argument positions insider status as a shared cultural identity, but looking to critical feminist ethnography, the picture of research dynamics appears more complex. In adopting a reflexive position, one understands the role

of the researcher as *situated* (Smith, 1987). Further contending the construction of the removed, passive researcher within the positivist paradigm, Smith (1987) highlights the inherent relational and connected nature of the research relationship. As such, examining research interactions in light of positionality becomes salient (Parikh, 2020). It has long been assumed that researchers occupy dichotomous insider *or* outsider positions, each accompanied by discrete challenges or advantages in the field (Merriam et al, 2001; Parikh, 2020). Contemporary sociological and anthropological work, however, situates researcher status as something much more fluid (Merriam et al, 2001; Parikh, 2020). In Parikh's (2020) study of call centre worked in Mumbai, she describes the ephemeral nature of her positionality in relation to participants, fluctuating between insider and outsider roles throughout her time in the field. Similarly, Merriam et al (2001) suggests much higher degrees of 'slippage' between these positions than previously construed in ethnographic work. Narayan (1993, p. 671) argues:

"The loci along which we are aligned with or set apart from those whom we study are multiple and in flux. Factor such as education, gender, sexual orientation, class, race, or sheer duration of contacts may at different times outweigh the cultural identity we associate with insider or outsider status"

Therefore, the impact of researcher positionality is not necessarily mitigated by shared identity. This is highlighted by MacRae (2007) and Merriam et al (2001), even where researchers understood themselves as insiders of the group they studied, spoke the same language, and had similar cultural experiences, barriers to congruence and understanding still occurred. It is therefore perhaps more useful to understand insider/outsider discourse as a spectrum of social, economic and cultural proximity to research participants. Considering this, reflexive feminist research practice thus requires meaningful thought as to how we may move around this spectrum throughout the research process, and how in turn this effects the co-production of knowledge with participants.

MacRae (2007) argues that whatever the extent of proximity a researcher starts with, critical reflexivity is key to gleaning understanding and making explicit the implications of one's situation. I am, at the time of writing, over a decade older than the young women who participated in my research. I did not attend a Catholic school, come from a white, middle-

class background and am situated within the academy. Considering Ramazanoglu and Holland's (2002) levels of feminist reflexivity, giving weight to the influence of these positional factors on relational moments throughout the focus groups and interviews, but also within the analysis and write up of this thesis, is an integral step in orientating this work from a distinctly feminist perspective. Crucially, these aspects of my personhood are understood, not as arbitrary factors to be scraped from this research, but rather as salient to the kind of knowledge produced by this thesis. Fundamentally, this gives rise to a more explicit discussion of the philosophical implications of the research discussed, as provided in the next section.

4.3 Philosophical Outline

In this section, I explore the philosophical assumptions underpinning the research design employed within this thesis. Ontological and epistemological positions describe our core assumptions about reality, shaping what we conceive as knowable and how we theorise knowledge of the world around us can be gained (Strega, 2005). These philosophical positions form the foundations of all social research and dictate how exactly we approach the study of social phenomena. As highlighted in the prefacing quote of this chapter, Strega (2005, p. 199) argues that researchers who begin the research progress by asking fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of their work are already engaging with these philosophical traditions. Strega further argues that for researchers concerned with social justice, the answers to these fundamental questions represent 'not just methodological choices, but choices about resistance and allegiance to the hegemony of Eurocentric thought and research traditions—the master's tools.' (Strega, 2005, p. 199). In drawing on the work of Audre Lorde, Strega offers a view of methodology not just as the mechanics of research, but as a radical strategy that attempts to prevent the replication of harmful normative, patriarchal and racist conventions within the academy. Building on Strega's view, this chapter demonstrates the philosophical underpinnings of this research, and seeks to illustrate the ethical and ideological importance of the corresponding methodological decisions made within the research process.

4.3a Ontology

In the study of metaphysics, ontology is concerned with the nature of being and existence (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). In a research context, one's ontological positions denotes an understanding of what exists and what is available to be *known* about the world around us (Strega, 2005). Guba and Lincoln (1994) present a paradigmatic divide within social research ontologies; between positivism, which posits a 'realist' ontology, and constructivism, which holds a relativist ontology. The former holds that a singular, objective reality, governed by natural laws, is apprehensible, whilst the latter holds that multiple realities are perceived and are constructed through experience and social context (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Since The Enlightenment, the West has long revered the positivist, realist ontological position as the correct one (Strega, 2005). The Enlightenment fuelled an understanding of truth as that what is 'verifiable', thus bolstering a conception of reality as knowable through scientific discovery (Strega, 2005). Thus, the dominant ontological view within Western society posits reality as tangible and 'out there' to be known. As there are a plethora of epistemological positions within feminist research, attempting to situate a singular 'feminist ontology' would be misguided (Harding, 1987). Instead, ontological positions with feminist research can be more broadly understood as reimaginations of pre-established philosophical positions, challenging the patriarchal and androcentric focus of scientific approaches (Campbell and Wasco, 2000). Within this research, I adopt a constructivist ontology, thus supporting the ontological assumption that there is no single objective truth and that a person's race, class, gender and position within society shapes their perceptions and experiences of reality (Campbell and Wasco, 2000).

4.3b Epistemology

Epistemology refers to the theory of knowledge, it queries the relationship between the 'knower' and what can be known (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Campbell and Wasco, 2000; Benton and Craib, 2007). In feminist research specifically, this brings into the question the notion of *who* knows about certain aspects of reality (Maynard, 1994; Stanley and Wise, 1993). Guba and Lincoln (1994) position a similar paradigmatic framework of epistemic positions to that of ontological positions, in that positivist and constructivist positions hold

implications as to how we theorize gaining knowledge. Campbell and Wasco (2000) note that within positivism, the identity of the 'knower' (researcher) is irrelevant, positivist research seeks to understand objective reality free from human values and beliefs. Epistemologically, this manifests in a naturalist stance which stipulates that the methods of natural science and the aim of objective knowledge can also fit the social sciences (Risjord, 2014). For this reason, feminist research can broadly be understood to reject strict positivist epistemology by adopting an 'anti-naturalist, or interpretivist, stance which argues for a distinct methodological and epistemological understandings of how we gather knowledge about the social world (Risjord, 2014).

Centrally, my works draws on three interpretivist epistemological positions, which are outlined in full within this section: feminist standpoint theory, phenomenology and hermeneutics. These positions are shaped both by the overarching feminist lens applied to my research, but also by the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which is explored more substantively in section 4.5 (p. 125).

4.3b (i) Feminist Standpoint Epistemology

Feminist epistemologies broadly highlight that our position within societal power structures fundamentally shapes how we gain knowledge, thus challenging the notion of the objective, value-free researcher positivists seek (Harding, 1986; 1991; Stanley and Wise, 1993). Harding (1986) notes that in traditional philosophy being (ontology) and knowing (epistemology) have been separated, and it is the task of feminist epistemologies to acknowledge the integrated relationship between the two. This, to me, is the central characterisation of feminist research philosophy. We do not obtain knowledge in a vacuum, and thus our identity and position relative to the dominant social structures in society shapes how we perceive and develop understanding about the world.

Feminist standpoint theory (FST) is an epistemological position built around the voices of the oppressed (Maynard, 1994). FST emerged within debates surrounding socialist and Marxist feminism in the 1970s and 1980s (Naples and Gurr, 2014). FST is broadly understood to stem from Hartsock's (1983) work, which sought to rework Marx's historical

materialism from a feminist perspective, thus explicating the gendered nature of normative social hierarchies. Hartsock drew the concept of the 'standpoint' from Marxist theory, the notion that reality is perceived differently from different material conditions (Hekman, 1997). Hartsock (1983) emphasised that whilst the ruling groups in society will perceive their notion of reality as 'real', it is the perspective of the oppressed that exposes the true nature of social relation. This is what Harding (1987) deems 'epistemic advantage', argued that the subjugated position of women allows for a more in-depth insight into the reality of gendered power structures. This radical re-centring of knowledge production is certainly appealing, however the difficulties in defining the 'standpoint' in question must be acknowledged.

Naples and Gurr (2014) offer three dominant understandings of 'the standpoint' within feminist work. The first defines a women's standpoint as constructed through embodied and material social realities (Naples and Gurr, 2014). This position is reflected in the work of Ruddick (1989) who centres the material experience of motherhood and childbearing in the production of gendered ways of knowing. However, as Naples and Gurr (2014) highlight, this construction slides into an essentialised notion of womanhood, offering little diversity in what constitutes a 'women's' standpoint. The second model understands the standpoint as produced through community context (Naples and Gurr, 2013). This understanding rests on 'historically shared, group-based experiences' (Collins, 1997). Collins (1990; 1997) drew on this model in her analysis of black feminist knowledge production, arguing that black feminist thought was produced through recognition of shared experiences and societal positionality in relation to others. Collin's understanding of the standpoint successfully moves away from essentialised notions of identity based on physical characteristics, however, has too faced criticism for universalising experiences relating to class and race (Naples and Gurr, 2014). The final model for standpoint theorising instead constructs the standpoint as a beginning point for inquiry, rather than as a singular person or group with epistemic privilege (Naples and Gurr, 2014). This understanding is drawn from Dorothy Smith's (1992) work, in which she emphasises the standpoint as more a shift in the starting point of social science inquiry than a static point of epistemological access. In my work, I veer more towards Smith's modelling, understanding community and identity as something

more fluid than an embodied standpoint, aiming to begin inquiry with the perspective, voices and experiences of young women.

FST has met notable criticism, particularly surrounding the potentially universalising impact of constructing a singular 'women's standpoint' perspective (Olesen, 1994). Olesen (1994, p.163) highlights the risk of establishing an essential 'overarching inference as to the nature of woman' if claiming 'women' hold epistemic privilege of gender structures. This criticism is bolstered by Lemert (1992) who argues that feminist standpoint theory may fail to encapsulate the fragmented and varied realities of women's lives. Whilst find FST significantly bolsters the study of young women's lives, I find some accordance with Lemert's (1992) concerns as to whether a 'women's' standpoint successfully capture the fractured realities of class and race within social structures. Notably, Hartsock (1983) offers a distinction between 'women's' and 'feminist' standpoints; the first 'arises out of a class or gender's unanalysed engagement with its material environment perceived through the world view of the dominant group' whilst the second is the self-conscious critical awareness of a class/race/gender group of itself and own position in relation to the system it exists. As such, the yielding of a 'feminist' standpoint involves a two-pronged process of both scientific investigation, to dig below normative social relations, and education, drawn from the struggle to change those oppressive relations (Harding, 1987). Whilst this distinction is useful, criticism has been levied against the notion that a 'feminist' standpoint requires knowledge to be produced through the lens of women's movements or feminist scholarship (Benton and Craib, 2007). Therefore, potentially liberatory knowledge about reality is not immediately accessible to *all* women.

I find that Tolman's (1994) work successfully negates issues with traditional feminist standpoint epistemologies. Her presentation of epistemic privilege does not appear to allude to a singular and universal 'women's' or 'feminist' standpoint. Instead, she focuses on the epistemological position of oppressed groups in relation to axes of oppression. This is demonstrated in the centralising of women of colour, LGBTQ+ identities and working-class women within her study of young women's navigation of sexual desire (Tolman, 1994). This reflects my understanding of 'standpoints' as the subjective position of persons in relation to social structures and axes of oppression. Within the current study, this supports an

understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions of Catholic RSE delivery as shaped by their 'standpoint' in relation to wider societal structures and hierarchies of gender, class, race, faith and age.

4.3b (ii) Phenomenology

Phenomenology describes an epistemological position that centres 'lived experience' as the key to knowledge production, aiming to describe and understand phenomena as they appear to the person(s) experiencing them (Tuohy et al, 2013). Phenomenology emerged primarily through the work of Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century, offering a philosophical return to the reality of life and experience. Since its incarnation, phenomenology has been developed and utilised by many thinkers, through a variety of philosophical and political lens, including feminism, post-modernism, post-structuralism and existentialism (Tuohy et al, 2013). As such, phenomenology holds a varied and multi-discipline presence in social research.

There are two dominant strands of phenomenology: Transcendental (descriptive) and Hermeneutic (interpretive) (Tuohy et al, 2013). The former construction of phenomenology is that advocated for within Husserl's work, whilst the latter is largely rooted in Heidegger's later adaptions to phenomenological approaches (Finlay, 2008). Descriptive phenomenology aims to describe phenomena's 'general characteristics', as opposed to individual experiences, to build understanding of the essence and meaning of the phenomena described (Tuohy et al, 2013, p. 5). This strand of thinking is rooted in the positivist research paradigm and therefore seeks some degree of objectivity (Tuohy et al, 2013). Tuohy et al (2013) highlight three central concepts within descriptive phenomenology: consciousness, intentionality and bracketing. Viewing consciousness as the gateway between people and the world, Husserl argued that phenomenology ought to be driven by a focus on the conscience (Tuohy et al, 2013). Thus, the intention behind descriptive phenomenological method is to 'describe things as they appear to consciousness' (Moran, 2000, p.6). Intentionality refers to the notion that thoughts are always directed towards objects that the mind is already conscious of (Tuohy et al, 2013). The latter concept, bracketing, is rooted in Husserl's belief that presuppositions and preconceptions must be eschewed in

order to generate valid phenomenological data (Tuohy et al, 2013). Through bracketing, the phenomenon is described in it's 'purest' form, prior to being 'corrupted' by attitudes and other factors that may shape how one understands an experience (Tuohy et al, 2013). Within research, this necessitates the researcher 'reflexively restraining pre-understandings' (Finlay, 2008, p.2) thus suspending their own experiences and worldview in order to capture phenomena in their 'pre-reflective' state. This positivist approach to experiential research warrants significant critique, especially when used within sexuality and gender research, and research with young people. I will address this in full in the next section.

Interpretive phenomenology differs from the eidetic strand in that it centres understanding and interpreting people's experiences. Tuohy et al (2013) identify four key concepts that underpin interpretive phenomenological thought and approach; being-in-the-world (Dasein), fore-structure, the hermeneutic circle and life-world existential themes. The first concept of Dasein, or being-in-the-world, is used within Heidegger's work to describe the 'situated-ness' of human existence (Reed and Ground, 1997). The notion of 'Dasein' acknowledges that as humans we exist 'embedded in a world of meaning', our realities are forged within social, political, historical and cultural and the research process must reflect and embrace such shaping factors.

The second central concept within interpretive phenomenology, fore structure, describes the network of past experiences and preconceptions that shape how the researcher relates to the phenomenon being studied (Tuohy et al, 2013). McCance and Mcilfatrick (2008) argue that the researcher ought to be considered inseparable from their experiences and cannot eschew what they know and think, and as reflected by McConnell-Henry et al (2009) these fore-structures can be valuable and generative in themselves. Flood (2010) evokes the notion of 'co-constitutionality' to describe how meaning is produced from the blending of participant and researcher perspectives. To me, the centrality of fore structure in phenomenological research appears to mirror the role of reflexivity in feminist research (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). Both implore continuous reflection on researcher positionality, experiences, and 'baggage', but a feminist lens also necessitates reflection on proximity to power and social structures (Arendell, 1997, p. 343). For this reason, I feel a phenomenological epistemology is highly compatible with a feminist research ethos and

lends itself to integration with feminist standpoint theory in the investigation of young women's lived experiences.

Van Manen (1990) proposes existential themes as fundamental considerations for phenomenologists when attempting to understand how people experience the world. The existential themes are drawn from Merleau-Ponty's work, including temporality (lived time), spatiality (lived space), corporeality (lived bodies) and relationality (lived human relationships) (Tuohy et al, 2013). These categories refer to the ways in which people relate to and experience their subjective material surroundings, their own body and other people and ultimately how these factors shape our experience of the world (Tuohy et al, 2013). The final concept within interpretive phenomenology, the hermeneutic circle, refers to the circular process by which understanding is gained through continuous re-examination (Tuohy et al, 2013). This is central tenet of the IPA process, as explored in section 4.5 (p. 126), and is a driving force in the analytic framework applied within the current study.

4.3b (iii) Hermeneutics

Setting understandings of hermeneutic phenomenology aside, Hermeneutics holds a long standing, independent history as a mode of understanding texts, and thus provides a robust philosophical approach to exploring the world around us (Smith et al, 2009). Whilst broadly understood as a 'theory of interpretation' (King-Hill, 2013), hermeneutics bolsters the epistemological position employed within my research by centralising the importance how we read other people's words and experiences in producing knowledge. Hermeneutics originated as the study of biblical texts and other scripture, offering a means to extrapolate meaning from old religious texts, that may have been re-written many times over centuries in different languages and formats (Willis, 2007). In order to yield meaning, Hermeneutic study might include the examination of other texts from the era and of the political and social context the text was written in (Willis, 2007).

4.3b (iv) Possibilities of Multiple Epistemologies

Whilst careful consideration ought to be given to the integration of multiple philosophies or methods within research (Cohen et al, 2021), I believe there to be enormous benefit in the application of plural epistemologies. As argued by Shaw and Frost (2015, p.1), much research can adopt what they deem a 'silo mentality', unable of adapting to or work with other 'ways'. Fundamentally, this fails to capture the multi-dimensional and multi-ontological nature of human experience (Shaw and Frost, 2015). In turn, they argue that a move out of a strict 'paradigm war' mentality bolstered a richer insight into the lifeworld (Shaw and Frost, 2015, p.1).

In the case of this thesis, the three epistemological positions represent the methodological decision to employ Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in a distinctly feminist framework. This specific point of philosophical integrations is explored thoroughly by Cohen et al (2021). In essence, they argue that value in this specific merging of approaches is yielded through the provision of feminist direction and motivation to IPA's study of specifics (Cohen et al, 2021). The feminist framework asks *whose* lived experiences are traditionally represented, and who may be best positioned to illuminate existing social structures and intersections of oppression (Cohen et al, 2021). In my view, the intersection of these epistemological paradigms off enormous value, offering purposive insight into the lived experience of young women, with the goal of illuminating social structures surrounding youth, gender, faith and sex. Watson (2020) discusses the value of 'braided' methods, in reference to integrating arts-based and mixed methods research techniques. Building on this, I argue that of 'braided' research philosophies offer immense value, yielding rich and multi-dimension knowledge of the social world. The application of this braided epistemological framework within the current study offers an innovative methodological lens for the investigation of RSE implementation and young women's experiences of Catholic education.

4.3c Axiology

More recent work on research philosophy has argued for the inclusion of axiology, alongside epistemology and ontology (Denzin et al, 2018; Saunders et al, 2019). Axiology describes the theory of ethics, aesthetics, and religion, in the context of research, it seeks to describe the

relationship to values within the process of inquiry (Lincoln et al, 2019). Our ethical and value-frameworks can shape almost every stage of research, from the selection of a problem to study, to the methods of data collection and analysis (Lincoln et al, 2018). As with the philosophical issues explored earlier in this chapter, varying research paradigms hold different axiological implications (Saunders et al, 2019). In essence, the axiological positioning of research dictates how 'goodness' is yielded from the process of inquiry (Gormely, 2005). As such, axiology questions the ethics and values than underpin research positions. This is explored at length in the table below:

Table 5: Axiological Positions

	Positivism	***Post-positivism***	***Critical (feminist/ race theory)***	***Constructivism/ interpretivism***	***Post-Modern/ Participatory***
Values: What do researchers seek as important products within research inquiry?	Standards-based research. Research value found in rigorous scientific method.	Can find useful information even if data is incomplete or contains hidden values.	Values are included and formative (Guba and Lincoln, 2005) Research seeks data which can be transformative or illuminating in context of social justice	Values are formative and included, but also personally relative and inseparable from the research process and outcomes.	Values are formative and included, but also personally relative and inseparable from the research process and outcomes.
Ethics: The interaction and relationship between researcher and researched and the effect the inquiry has on the populations	Data drives any side effects of research. Aim is to study nature, not how to influence how nature affects population	Attempt to be as statistically accurate in interpreting reality as possible. Effect on others not considered as aim for research is accuracy rather than influencing populations	Frankfurt school: Research is tied to a specific interest in the development of a society without injustice	Intrinsic - process tilt towards revelation. Ethics included in all aspects of inquiry and examination of culture.	Intrinsic - process tilt towards revelation. Ethics included in all aspects of inquiry and examination of culture.

Adapted from Denzin et al (2018, p. 122-123)

As this thesis draws on distinctly constructivist, interpretive paradigms – and is orientated through a feminist theoretical framework, the axiology employed is reflected in the latter three columns shown above. Thus, in the context of this work, goodness is derived through

the solicitation of data that illuminates potential for injustice in faith school RSE provision. Furthermore, values and ethics are understood as integral driving factors in all stages of the research conducted – with a particular view to consider feminist ethical approaches to inquiry. Overall, this research adopts an axiology that situates inquiry as inherently value-laden – thus acknowledging the theoretical and political underpinning of the work conducted.

4.4 Data Collection Design and Structure

4.4a Introduction and Timeline

Due to the adoption of IPA as an analytic framework, and the phenomenological underpinnings of the work, the research questions were designed to centre young women's lived experiences and perceptions (Schwandt, 1994). The study discussed employed pupil focus groups as the primary form of data collection. In parallel, I chose to run staff with a view of ascertaining a richer insight into the social context surrounding young women's experiences. As this research began in 2019, the study was significantly hindered by the COVID-19 crisis and faced notable barriers throughout its duration. The structure and timeline of the study are displayed in the table below are outlined below, alongside personal reflections on the difficulties posed by conducting school-based research during and following a global pandemic.

Table 6: Research Timeline and Impact of COVID-19

Key Dates	Research Tasks and Events	Reflections
October 2019 – February 2020	Commenced PhD. Began research methods training and started initial reading for narrative literature review on girlhood and sex education (Chapter Two).	During the initial months of my PhD, I primarily focused on completing training modules in qualitative and quantitative research methods, and the philosophy of research. Learning during this period significantly shaped the content of what came to be the methodology chapter of this thesis (Chapter Four). I already had a good idea of the overarching project design for my research, having conducted a small-scale qualitative study with teachers in Catholic schools during my master's degree. I intended to build on this research by carrying out in-

	Began initial planning for research design and methodology.	depth, semi-structured interviews with young women across 5 Catholic secondary schools. Throughout this period, I devoted a significant amount of time to reading youth studies and cultural studies literature focused on the social production girlhood, which significantly informed the narrative review offered in Chapter Two.
March 2020	First national lockdown announced in response to escalating COVID-19 pandemic.	As I was primarily conducting desk-based research during this period, my work was, initially, largely undisrupted by the first lockdown. However, I was intending to submit my application for ethical review at the end of the academic year, and it was highly unclear whether my proposed research design would be possible in the near future. All schools in the UK were closed 'until further notice' on the 18th of March (Johnson, 2020). Many schools were forced to shift to online learning at this time (Horan et al, 2023).
April 2020 – September 2020	Continued work on literature review (Chapter Two). Preliminary development of research design.	I decided to delay applying for ethical review until more clarity was available surrounding the nature of research that would be possible in schools. As such, I focused on refining and authoring Chapter Two. The first lockdown was an intensely uncertainty and anxiety inducing period for many people and the pace at which I was able to complete research work slowed significantly. This was a personally tumultuous period of time, and I ended up taking some extended sick leave due to stress, which further halted research progress. As explored in section 3.2d (p. 61), this was a highly disruptive time for English schooling, and had serious implications for the delivery of RSE, with the statutory roll out postponed until summer 2021 (Long, 2023).
October 2020 – December 2020	Developing research design and ethical review application. Produced provision topic guides and participant information and consent documents (Appendices D-F). Submitted application for ethical review (see Appendix A, p. 305).	Autumn of 2020 saw COVID-19 rates begin to rise, and whilst schools sporadically re-opened, they were faced with an ever-changing set of policy requirements (Howard et al, 2021). The UK government imposed a chaotic series of safety measures during this time, including the regional 'tier' systems and, eventually, a second lockdown starting in November 2020 (Timmins, 2021). With English schools remaining subject to change and uncertainty, I decided to apply for ethical review but include two additional back-up research designs, in the case that face-to-face research remained unfeasible. These can be seen in Appendix A (p. 309). The application was submitted in December 2020. In order to assess the feasibility of conducting different modes of qualitative research within schools, I made preliminary contact with a number of Catholic schools by emailing RSE

	Began to make preliminary contact with Catholic schools to see what kind of research would be possible to and to assess interest in the project.	leads and advertising on social media. This acted as a preliminary step in recruitment. The social media flyer can be seen in Appendix C (p. 330).
January – May 2021	Continued preliminary relationship building with Catholic schools. Began methodology reading for Chapter Four. Received feedback from ethics committee (May 2021) and decided to reformulate research design.	After some preliminary conversations with gatekeepers in schools, I chose to rethink the research. During this period, schools had varying policies on visitors, and some were particularly concerned with protecting year 11 and 13s so they could sit exams in the summer term. Furthermore, the prospect of virtual classroom observations evoked some staff anxiety as they would be documented delivering brand new RSE content. In turn, I decided to replace observations and individual pupil interviews with focus groups and individual staff interviews. I also chose to focus on girls in Year 9 as they would not be engaged in GCSES or A-Levels. The university ethics committee provided feedback on the application for ethical review (see Appendix A, p. 323). Their response was significantly delayed due to a backlog of applications during the lockdown periods.
June – August 2021	Began Chapter Four Writing. Submitted response amendments to research design. to ethics committee (August 2021).	During this period, I primarily focused on re-drafting the research design of the project to reflect the amendments described above (see Appendix A, p. 323). Amendments and a response to the committee's feedback were submitted in August. I also began drafting what would become this chapter.
September - December 2021	Received full ethical approval (September 2021) Recruitment. **Data collection (School A) (November 2021)**	After receiving ethical approval, I began contacting schools I had made connections with during preliminary relationship building. However, the ongoing impact of covid-19 on schools resulted in additional 'catch up' pressure (Timmis, 2021), meaning many schools/teachers were unwilling to take on additional work or did not have the time to engage in research process. I found it harder than expected to make contact with SLT in schools, who also would have been under significant pressure in this period and was primarily working with RSE or PSHE leads. As such, I removed the preliminary SLT interviews from

		the research design proposed in the amended ethics application. Continued recruitment on social media and by making direct contact with Catholic second schools, and eventually commenced the first set of fieldwork in November 2021.
January – April 2022	Took leave of absence for work placement.	n/a
May – June 2022	Recruitment **Data Collection (School B) (June 2022)**	Significant gap between data collections owing to work placement and difficulty finding Catholic schools willing to engage in research on RSE. On-going pressure of 'catch-up' education post-pandemic meant that schools continued to prioritise 'core' subject delivery (Horan et al, 2023). Further, contact with some schools revealed teacher concerns around scrutiny on RSE delivery, particularly following negative press coverage of A Fertile Heart RSE delivery in Catholic schools in Herefordshire (see section 3.3b, p. 71). Finally made contact with School B, and conducted second set of data collection in June 2022. Decided to halt attempts to recruit a third school due to time constraints of PhD funding.
July 2022 – July 2023	Transcription. Completed IPA process for focus group and interview transcripts Finished writing Chapter Four. Begun writing Chapter Three,	The scale of data produced from the staff interviews and pupil focus groups was unprecedented. I began manual transcription of the audio-recordings, but this proved to be far too time consuming. As explored in section 4.4e (p. 124) I employed assistive software to reduce transcription time Smith et al (2009) emphasise that the IPA process can be both labour and time intensive, and this proved to be true in my experience. The analysis process took nearly a full year in total and required extensive engagement with the data (also owing to working part-time alongside my studies). This was, at times, quite a challenging period as it took much longer than anticipated to progress each IPA stage (see section 4.5 , p. 125). During this time, I also authored the majority of what would become Chapter Three.
July 2023 – July 2024	Write up of remaining thesis chapters.	In my final year, I focused largely on authoring the findings and discussion chapters (Chapters Five-Seven).

4.4b Sampling and Recruitment

This research attempts to capture and reflect a rich insight into the perceptions and experiences of a specific group of young women attending Catholic schools. As generalisability to the wider population was not a central aim of this work, a generic purposive, non-probabilistic sampling strategy was deemed most appropriate (Cohen et al, 2017). In the case of studies involving IPA, the close focus on individual life experiences and meaning making shifts the focus of sampling towards specific groups of theoretical interest, rather than a broad representation of society (Smith et al, 2009). With this in mind, the study in question draws on a combination of purposive and theoretical sampling.

The use of purposive sampling within this research design arguable contributes to the yielding of 'rich and relevant' in-depth data by focusing on specific sites (Flick, 2009, p. 123). Generic purposive sampling enables researchers to establish inclusion criteria that reflect their research questions on an a priori basis (Bryman, 2016). Within this research, the initial inclusion criteria were as follows: self-identifying as a girl, attending a state-mandated Catholic secondary school in England and being in receipt of statutory RSE content. Due to the last inclusion criterium, participants were further stipulated to be between KS3 and KS4 school years as these are the only school stages in which Relationships and Sex Education are currently legally mandated (Department for Education, 2019a). Within theoretical sampling, samples are selected on the basis that those specific cases will yield greater insight into the theoretical issues under examination (Cohen et al, 2017). This research can be seen to drawn on this form of sampling, firstly, in the selection of young women, as opposed to all young people. This choice is rooted in feminist literature that emphasises the potential impact of harmful RSE narratives on young women (Fine, 1992). The work of Tolman (1994) suggests that race and class are central factors in young women's ability to resist harmful rhetoric and enact sexual agency. Therefore, a central aim during the sampling stage was to select schools from economically deprived regions with racially diverse pupil populations, alongside pre-dominantly white, middle class school sites. Due to the disruption and additional difficulties surrounding recruitment, owing to additional pressure on schools throughout the COVID-19 crisis, the sample was not as economically diverse as initially intended. A further factor in the theoretical sampling element of this

study was the representation of different regional dioceses. Catholic schools in England and Wales are overseen by 22 regional dioceses, who play a significant role in the interpretation and implementation of statutory RSE policy within Catholic schools (Catholic Education Service, 2014) (see section 3.3c, p. 75). Therefore, it was important to able to compare diocesan approaches across participating schools.

Sample size within focus group research can vary enormously, the number of participants in each group and the number of groups overall are highly dependent on the nature of the research topic, the kind of data solicited and time available (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999). As with much qualitative research, statistical representation is broadly not the aim in research using focus groups (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999). As such, the adoption of purposive and theoretical sampling strategies accords with this method of data collection.

Market research literature suggests that the ideal number of focus group participants is between 8-12, however, Kitzinger and Barbour (1999) argue that the ideal number for focus groups in social science work is around 5-6 participants. Based on this, the pupil focus groups comprised six students in School A, and five in School B (n=11). A random name generator was used to create pseudonyms to maintain participant anonymity. All participants were in Year 9 at the time the focus groups were conducted, and therefore aged 13-14. Further demographic characteristics of the pupil participants are shown below:

Table 7 Demographic Details of Young Women Participants

School A	
Mia	○ White ○ Faith unknown ○ Sexuality unknown
Lily	○ South Asian ○ Faith unknown ○ Sexuality unknown
Ella	○ South Asian ○ Faith Unknown ○ Sexuality unknown
Nadia	○ White ○ Faith unknown ○ Sexuality unknown
Saffi	○ White.

	○ Faith unknown ○ Sexuality unknown
Sasha	○ White ○ Faith unknown ○ Sexuality unknown
School B	
Ruby	○ South Asian ○ Catholic ○ Sexuality unknown
Ada	○ White ○ Faith unknown ○ Identifies as queer
Krista	○ Black ○ Non-religious but raised in Catholic family ○ Sexuality unknown
Nisha	○ Black ○ Catholic ○ Sexuality unknown.
Chloe	○ White ○ Faith unknown ○ Sexuality unknown.

Within the pupil focus groups, I initially chose not to ask about individual religious identities in the first focus group, a decision which I later overturned for the second group as I felt it would in fact provide useful contextualisation of the pupil perspectives. This change was afforded by the inherent flexibility of semi-structured approaches to interviewing (Thomas, 2017). I did not ask the young women to disclose their sexual identity but have included this information in the case that participants self-reported this during our conversation. This decision was informed by an understanding that the school context may not necessarily represent a safe space for young women to 'come-out', due to the prevalence of homophobic bullying and poor staff responses to LGBTQ+ pupils in UK schools (Formby, 2015).

The participating schools were recruited through a contact made with Catholic schools via letters and phone calls during the preliminary relationship building stage (Appendix B, p. 330), and a call for participants on Twitter (Appendix C, p. 331). As I worked with 'gatekeepers' at each school, I had relatively little involvement in directly recruiting young women for the study. The term 'gatekeepers' refers to individuals who manage and facilitate researcher access to participants and/or institutions (McFadyen and Rankin, 2016). In research with children and young people, gatekeepers play an important role in safeguarding this vulnerable group against coercive or unethical research, and often act as

logistical contacts for organising data collection (Kay, 2019). In the present study, the gatekeepers were RSE teachers in the participating schools, and also participated in the staff interviews. In order to recruit pupils for the focus groups, I provided each gatekeeper with the parameters for inclusion (KS3, self-identifying as a girl) and emphasised that any pupils within those parameters could volunteer. Both teachers selected participants from their Year 9 form classes, who they felt would be most interested in the topic and would want to engage in research. Without prompt, both gatekeepers also selected groups of young women who were already friends and felt very comfortable in each other's company. Market research focus groups are traditionally made up of strangers to avoid inhibiting data production (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999). However, Kitzinger and Barbour (1999) view pre-existing social groups as advantageous for social science research, as they facilitate participant comfort and more naturalistic conversations. Notably, however, it bears considering that 'natural' groups are likely to have pre-existing social hierarchies that may play out within the focus group. It is therefore the task of the researcher to ensure that all participants have opportunities to speak (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999).

Powell and Smith (2009,p. 124) argue that the recruitment stage of studies involving children and young people is uniquely challenging in that the researchers access to potential participants is 'tightly controlled' by a hierarchy of gatekeepers including ethics committees, organizations, professionals, parents, caregivers and teachers. As Hood et al (1996) argue, the socio-political positioning of young people means that adults must give permission, in some form, before they can participate in research. Whilst these processes are necessary to ensure both young people and researchers are safeguarded, this can result in a sense of powerlessness for researchers due to their dependency on the 'goodwill' of other agencies to enable access to participants (Aldgate and Bradley, 2004). Furthermore, young people themselves remain reliant on adult gatekeepers to decide what information they can receive and ultimately, whether they can take part in research (Powell and Smith, 2009). Fundamentally, research recruitment processes further demonstrate the extent to which young people's lives are mediated by policy and institutions

For the staff interviews, I employed a purposive and snowball approach to sampling, (Bryman, 2016), interviewing the key gatekeeper in each school, and additionally, the Head

of Department in School B. Brief pen portraits of the two schools and the teachers interviewed within them are offered below:

Table 8: Pen-Portraits of Schools and Teachers

	School Details	Participant Details
School A	• A Roman Catholic secondary school with around 1300 pupils at time of research. • Ofsted rating of Outstanding at last inspection. • Situated in predominantly white, middle-class, suburban town in West-Midlands. • Around 10% of pupils are eligible for free school meals. Mixed Gender.	Teacher One (T1) was a white woman in her late-twenties. Her religious identity and relationship status were not disclosed. She completed her training to be a history teacher at the school five years prior, and had worked there ever since. She started teaching PSHE as a second subject at the end of her NQT year, and took on lead responsibility for it the following year.
School B	• A Roman Catholic secondary school identified as a part of a distinct global network of Catholic schools led by the ethos of a particular Saint and religious order (not named to maintain confidentiality). • Around 1500 pupils at time of research. • Ofsted rating of Good. • Located in affluent suburb of a city in South Yorkshire. • 11.2% of pupils are eligible for free school meals. Mixed Gender.	Teacher Two (T2) was a white woman in her early thirties, who identified as Catholic. She was divorced from a prior marriage and lived with her current boyfriend. At the time of the interview, she had been teaching RE for seven years and had worked at School B for two years. She completed her teacher training at a secular comprehensive school, yet moved to a Catholic school the following year. She had taught PSHE and RSE consistently throughout her career. Teacher Three (T3) was a white man in his thirties, who identified as Catholic. He was married with two young daughters. He attended School B as a child. He had worked in the RE department at the school since starting his teacher training. He became Head of Department a few years prior and had recently taken on an additional Head of Ethos role.

4.4c Focus Groups

I chose focus groups as the principal means of data collection for soliciting young women's voices within this research. Overall, I conducted two focus groups, one at each research site, with around five to six pupils per group. Whilst focus groups may not be as adept in capturing individual biographies in comparison to one-to-one interviews, group conversation provides an excellent means of examining how knowledge, story-telling, self-presentation and ideas are produced in specific cultural contexts (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999) – in this case, the culture of Catholic education. In this section, I outline the advantages and challenges of focus group research in relation to the subject nature and philosophical underpinning of this research.

4.4c (i) Focus Groups and Sensitive Topic Research

Throughout writing and researching for this thesis, I have broadly referred to and understood my work as 'sensitive' topic research. There is a plurality of definitions for 'sensitive' topics, all of which seem to carry implications for research design, particularly for the choice of qualitative data collection methods. Faraquhar (1999) defines 'sensitive' research as research with the capacity to elicit strong feelings, within both researchers and participants and at times, the wider population. Alternatively, Lee and Renzetti (1993) argue that it can be understood as research that deals in topics and/or behaviours that are 'intimate, discreditable or incriminating'. Looking at broader definitions within the academy, 'sensitivity' becomes intertwined with concerns about risk. Online guidance produced by UCL (2022) defines sensitive topic research as work that: 'carries with it particular risks that need to be managed, with particular consideration being given to the potential consequences of these risks.'

Before substantiating the choice to use focus groups within this particular piece of research, I wish to unpack the construction of 'sensitive topic' research. Faraquhar (1999) asks that researchers consider why, and by whom, certain topics are delineated as 'sensitive'. Certainly, it may be that this label arises from ethical questions around consent and participant wellbeing. However, it is also true that our own anxieties as researchers play into

this title – the reactions of funders, colleagues, institutions and the general public potentially playing on the mind (Faraquhar, 1999). Faraquhar (1999) highlights a tendency within the academy to paint all research related to sexuality as 'sensitive', their own research into lesbian sexual health being cast as such. They also note a divergence in the construction of general health research compared to sexual health research, with the latter deemed significantly more sensitive than the other (Faraquhar, 1999). As highlighted by Allen (2009), labelling a subject matter or participant group as inherently risky leads to increased institutional resistance to supporting research in that area. This is particularly true of school-based sexuality research (Allen, 2009), whereby the intersection of young people and reference to sex triggers alarm bells within university ethics procedures. Of course, ethical review plays a critically important role in safeguarding vulnerable groups and ensuring morally justifiable research methods are used. However, as Allen (2009) argues, institutional responses can also be shaped by wider social refusal to talk about young people and sexuality, and can create additional barriers for ethical, meaningful work in this area.

Reflecting Faraquhar's (1999) view, I want to emphasise that the 'sensitivity' of the research conducted within this thesis is not static, it is produced within a context of taboo and social, gendered norms. In turn, I feel there cannot be a monolithic approach to sensitive topic research design. Instead, in-depth consideration should be granted to the subject matter of research, the participants, the researcher, and the structural context in which they exist.

Despite attempts to deconstruct 'sensitive topics', the label is still persistently imbued with meaning and implications for research design. Work pertaining to sexuality, and gender has generally relied heavily on one-to-one interviewing (See Holland et al, 1994). Building on this, group interviewing methodologies have broadly been viewed as unsuitable for research concerning these topics. Over the years, this dominant methodological view has been challenged, with Faraquhar (1999) arguing that 'their [focus groups] inappropriateness for research around sensitive topics cannot simply be assumed'. The rejection of focus group methods in sensitive topic research is rooted in a preconceived notion of what people are willing to discuss in groups (Morgan and Kruger, 1993). In fact, as Morgan and Kruger (1993, p. 7) argue, there is often a 'certain thrill' to be had in open, group discussions on taboo topics. Fielding (1993) highlight that their work with survivors of domestic violence,

participants felt more relaxed and willing to discuss their experiences in a group setting. Whilst particular consideration should be given to creating a safe environment for personal disclosure in focus groups (Morgan and Krueger, 1993), it is certainly possible and valuable to elicit sensitive topic data from group conversations.

4.4c (ii) Focus Groups in Feminist Research

In this section, I break down the advantages and challenges of applying focus group methods within a feminist epistemological framework. As with 'sensitive topic research', focus groups have not been a historically favoured method of data collection within feminist work (Munday, 2014). Whilst focus groups have a long-established role in market research, the uptick in focus group research in the social sciences can only really be seen from the 1990s onwards (Montell, 1999). Despite this rise in popularity, the inclusion of focus groups in feminist research still remained relatively low (Montell, 1999). Montell's (1999) paper disputes this trend, declaring focus groups the 'new feminist method', advocating for the long-overlooked advantages of group interviewing. Certainly, the early 2000s saw increasing popularity for focus groups within feminist work, with Rose (2001) arguing that that the focus group could be said to be one of the *most* appropriate data collection methods within feminist research. In turn, this study builds on over two decades of focus groups as a developing feminist method, and hopefully demonstrates their continued value as a feminist method.

Notably, critical attention to traditional focus group practice is required before integrating the method into feminist research. Munday (2014) argues that the focus groups have become synonymous with market research, creating a perceived set of rigid rules researchers feel they must operate within. Principally, market research focus groups are associated with a positivist research paradigm, which as highlighted in section 4.3a (p. 90), seeks the objective truth of reality through data (Munday, 2014). Within focus group research, this would imply the researcher can ascertain the objective truth via participants' attitudes and opinions (Munday, 2014). Within this dynamic, it is the role of the researcher to direct the focus group in such a way to more accurately produce an objective account of the participant's views (Munday, 2014). It is also why market research literature so strictly

stipulates factors such as focus group composition and size, aiming for a rigorous and optimised method to elicit the 'truth' (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999). Traditional market research literature therefore necessitates the researcher to present as 'faceless, objective, nonentities' (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999, p. 14). As established in the earlier sections of the chapter, the role of the 'value free' researcher is largely incompatible with feminist work as it negates consideration of the impact of intersecting social structures and inequalities on our perception of the world (Risjord, 2014). In her study of Australian women's involvement in sugar farming, Pini (2002) argues for a 'paradigmatic shift' in the use of focus groups. Within this, she advocates for a move away from the traditional positivist formulation towards a production of social, subjective, value-laden and political knowledge (Pini, 2002). Employing this shift, the focus group becomes a salient data collection method for this research.

The principal advantage of focus groups in feminist research, in my view, is their capacity to empower and support. The distinctly interactive, collective nature of focus groups offers the potential for collective meaning making in ways quite unlike a one-to-one interview (Munday, 2014). This benefit represents more than eliciting 'better' data but offers something potentially bolstering or transformative for the participants and researcher alike. Through group discussion, particular on subjects such as identity and sexuality, participants can collectively validate, give meaning to and illuminate experiences that may have previously been hidden or perceived only at an individual level (Munday, 2014). This enables further understanding of the collective position of women within patriarchal social structures (Munday, 2014).

The interactive nature and collective sharing of experiences within a focus group may offer a degree of consolidation or comfort to participants who may otherwise feel isolated in their lived experiences (Munday, 2014). This process is articulated by some, particularly within second-wave feminist work, as 'consciousness raising' (CR) (Naples and Gurr, 2014). Principally, CR refers to the collective process by which women begin to understand the social and political structures within which they are oppressed and develop strategies to challenge them (Naples and Gurr, 2014). The notion of CR is now highly contested, principally in that it assumes the collective realisation of oppressive structures will incite

material change to those conditions (Strega, 2005). Building on this critique, Munday (2014, p. 242) poses the question: *'what happens to women when the research is over, when they realise their situation but may lack the cultural, social and economic capital to do anything about it? '*Strega (2005) further highlights that women's and other marginalised groups material conditions broadly remain unchanged after consciousness raising efforts, so claiming inherently transformational potential from CR lead research is potentially harmful. This is not to discredit the great deal of information gathered from focus groups within feminist research, but rather to highlight as argued by McNeil (1993, p. 164) 'the more we know about the patriarchy, the harder it seems to change it'.

In the process of writing this chapter, I have wrestled with the capacity for CR within my own research. To some extent, I want to and do believe in the revolutionary potential of gaining knowledge about the social structures that constrain us as young women. However, I am incredibly wary of claiming any inherent transformational quality of using focus groups for social change. There is also an uncomfortable undercurrent of hierarchy in CR that warrants attention. Strega (2005, p. 221) argues that the ways in which CR sessions are facilitated (i.e. groups lead by a researcher or activist) means that access to agency and/or this empowering knowledge is mediated by someone 'more aware or advanced than us'. Crucially, the construction of the researcher as a gatekeeper to empowerment appears counterproductive to achieving the reflexive, non-hierarchical researcher-participant dynamic necessitated within ethical feminist research. I feel this presents ample opportunity for the replication of existing power structures within the research process. Overall, the social and collective aspects of focus groups should be accounted for and celebrated. However, as feminist researchers, we ought to be mindful in claiming any inherent revolutionary potential from our work. Whilst the sharing of collective experiences and group meaning making are incredibly valuable, I feel this value instead arises from the potential for solidarity, validation and support embodied within feminist focus groups.

The socially situated nature of focus groups can be viewed as a further advantage within feminist research (Munday, 2014). In positivist approaches to qualitative research, the researcher seeks the 'purest' data from participants, thus it is their job to overcome social interactions, barriers or interruptions that might 'contaminate' this underlying truth

(Wilkinson, 1998, p. 120). Positivist concerns have led more mainstream social researchers such as Kvale (1996, p. 101) to claim that focus groups can lead to 'relatively chaotic data collection'. However, for feminist researchers, the messy, unpredictable social nature of focus group research (i.e. uncomfortable silences, disagreements, storytelling, jokes) can be generative in of itself. Wilkinson (1998) highlights a particular irony in feminist research that work that makes 'the most insistent claims for women's collectivist, sociocentric, communal or connected selves' so often has relied on individualised research methods in doing on. Highlighting the centrality of social context in feminist knowledge production, Wilkinson (1998) argues that research methods that isolate the individual from the social worlds in which they inhabit ought to be deemed inappropriate for feminist aims.

Focus group methods situate social interactions as productive and valuable in of themselves, which I argue is highly compatible with the feminist research philosophy explored in section 4.3b (i) (p. 91). Within this context, Wilkinson (1998, p. 121) argues, the focus group becomes 'an instance of the co-construction of meaning in action'. Thus, focus groups need not be concerned with protecting an unbiased individual viewpoint of each participant. Instead, examining how participants *collectively* respond to a question, or a topic can reveal much about the social structures surrounding us. This again employs a 'paradigmatic shift' in how focus groups are perceived and used (Pini, 2002). Ultimately, the reframing of focus groups as valuable because of, rather than despite, their social nature makes them well suited to constructivist, feminist research.

Focus groups offer a useful strategy for tackling researcher-researched power imbalances during data collection. Oakley's (1981) seminal work on feminist interviewing draws attention to the potential for exploitation in the individual interview structure. Crucially, the assumption that feminist studies will inherently be free from hierarchy, inequality and power discrepancies is fallacious. As explored in section 4.2b (p. 85), much work has been done on the importance of reflexivity and awareness around power imbalances within feminist interviewing (Reinharz, 1983; Riessman, 1987; Hesse-Biber, 2014). Building on these concerns, focus groups potentially offer a more equitable alternative. As Wilkinson (1998) argues, the numerical increase in participants enables a shift in authority, away from the researcher. The format of group interviewing means that the researcher's influence is

'diffused' across participants (Frey and Fontana, 1993, p. 26). The more diffused nature of the group setting enables the researcher to take a more listening focused role, allowing for increased participant direction in the topics brought up, the language used and the scope of the conversation (Wilkinson, 1998). Thus, focus groups are a particular strength of Norris et al's (1996) study on women's experiences of 'date rape', allowing participants to set the agenda in terms of what they felt was important to understand about their experiences. This is not to say focus groups are therefore always free of power discrepancies, structural oppressions or exploitation. However, the structure of group interview certainly does shift the role of the researcher in ways, that if carefully considered, may allow for a less hierarchical approach than one-to-one interviewing.

Within the focus groups I conducted with young women, I was particularly conscious of reduced researcher input as a strength of focus groups. Whilst I posed some questions or topics to guide the interview, often some of the most stimulating areas of conversation came from the participants directing the conversation as they saw fit – bringing up anecdotes or themes they felt linked to previous discussion. The ability for the young women to run with the discussion without my continuous input was also a grounding moment for myself in terms of reflexivity. As an atheist, despite my efforts of reflexivity, I had pre-conceived notions of what I thought young women's responses would be to certain topics raised – particularly around Catholic values. To my surprise, the young women often took those responses in a completely different direction to what I anticipated, and I was again reminded of the importance of challenging our own positionality. I am immensely appreciative I chose a method that allowed for this, and I feel the data is of much higher quality because of it.

Overall, I feel that focus groups can be an incredibly effective tool within feminist research. Whilst I am cautious of claiming any inherent liberatory power from the two focus groups I conducted, the creation of space for validation, solidarity and collective support within focus group research is incredibly valuable. Employing a constructivist perspective, I found that viewing collective meaning making and knowledge production 'in action' enabled a heighted level of insight into young people's sexual and social worlds, which would have been inaccessible through individual interviews. Ultimately, whilst this method may have

not been the obvious choice, I feel focus groups were a key tool through which the feminist values of this project were upheld within the data collection process.

4.4c (iii) Focus Groups and IPA

Focus groups are a less popular choice for data collection within IPA studies, principally as it makes the extraction of individual phenomenological data more challenging (Smith et al, 2009). Despite this, focus group do still play a role in numerous published studies employing IPA. Flowers et al's (2000) work on community responsibility and HIV in Scottish men is an excellent example of social science work employing both focus groups and IPA. Notably, this work focuses less on the idiographic, phenomenological aspect of IPA data, and more so on the strengths of IPA in recognising the interpretative processes undertaken by the researcher in selecting key extracts from interview and focus group transcripts (Flowers et al, 2000). Fundamentally, it is this aspect of IPA that drew me to the method in the first place. Including the researcher's reflections and interpretations within the analytic process to me represents an enhanced level of reflexivity which was not offered by other qualitative analysis methods, such as thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Crucially, the decision to employ IPA was further grounded in experiential focus of RQ 2 *What are young women's lived experiences of statutory RSE in Catholic schools?* In turn, the phenomenological ethos of IPA appeared as a particularly advantageous framework for the present study. IPA necessitates close and prolonged engagement with each transcript, and due to the multiple stages of interpretation can be very time-consuming (Smith et al, 2009). In turn, it is best suited to small scale studies with relatively low participant numbers, compared to other qualitative work (Smith et al, 2009). The small sample employed within the current study was therefore extremely well-fitting for IPA. As reflected in Table 6 (p. 97), the scale of data produced through applying IPA to the focus group transcripts was unprecedented and may indicate a need for even smaller focus group samples in future IPA studies.

Smith et al (2009) emphasise the importance of ensuring participants feel able to discuss their own experiences in sufficient detail before deciding to employ IPA in focus group

research. As pre-established friendship groups were selected by the gatekeepers in each school, I felt confident that the participants would feel comfortable discussing their experiences as a group. Furthermore, the topic guide centred on the experience of RSE lessons and sexual cultures within school, rather than *sexual experiences* themselves, so I felt there was sufficient protective space for young women to discuss their experiences without necessarily *having to* share particularly personal details. For these reasons the selection of IPA remained an appropriate analytical choice for the focus groups conducted.

This is not to say there are no challenges associated with using focus groups within IPA. As Love et al (2020) argue, the principal concern surrounding focus group IPA pertains to the risk of individual voices being lost to group dynamics, and the subsequent difficulty of extracting individual experiences. As Smith (2004) further argues, an even higher level of engagement with the transcripts is required to solicit individual voices and experiences within a group conversation. Smith (2004, p.50) suggests researchers using focus groups and IPA 'parse' the transcripts twice at a minimum before starting analysis to ascertain group dynamics and patterns. As explored in section 4.4e (p. 124), this was ensured through the transcription process, in which I engaged with each transcript and recording at length. Alongside this, I employed a colour coding system throughout all stages of analysis to preserve and highlight the individual voices and experiences of participants (see appendices G, I and L).

4.4c (iv) Focus Groups and Young People

Children and young people's voices have been historically marginalised from research, and were largely discounted as an epistemic resource (Porcellato et al, 2002). Arguably, focus groups provide a meaningful way of acknowledging and centring young people as experts (Heary and Hennessy, 2002; Porcellato et al, 2002). In contrast to one-to-one interviews with children, Lewis (1992) argues that the involvement of other participants potentially alleviates the pressure of having to respond to questions without having understood or had time to form an answer. Building on this, Heary and Hennessy (2002) argue that focus

groups remove some of the emphasis on the adult-child relationship and may allow young people more space to respond authentically. Despite the potentially advantageous aspects of using focus groups with young people, some notable challenges have been identified. Lewis (1992) highlights the risk of children co-opting responses raise by other participants, instead of presenting their own view or experience. This is further identified by Spethman (1992) in their discussion of the role of peer pressures from pre-existing friendship groups in focus groups with children. It is worth noting that similar pressure to 'perform (and possibly conform)' to other participant views have been identified in adult focus groups (Ransome, 2013, p.41). Furthermore, concordance may also represent the significance of the issue raised, therefore shouldn't be automatically discounted as inauthenticity (Heary and Hennessy, 2002). An additional challenge is presented by concerns about children and young people's willingness to engage in discussion, particularly around sensitive topics, owing to the removal of anonymity in group settings (Heary and Hennessy, 2002; Pugsley, 1996). This line of concern appears to perpetually follow the application of group methods in sexuality research, yet as demonstrated in the prior sections, focus groups can in fact hold enormous emboldening potential in the discussion of otherwise taboo issues (Morgan and Kruger, 1993; Fielding, 1993). Overall, the value of focus groups as data collection with young people should not be understated.

Whilst focus groups hold significant potential in youth research, there are some important logistical and methodological considerations. Effective focus groups with children and young people must be tailored to the specific developmental stage and needs of the participants, thus ensuring language, communication style, and length is suitable (Heary and Hennessy, 2002). It has been suggested that the ideal composition of children's focus groups ought to be smaller than for adults, allowing for a balance between having 'talkers' and group management (Gibson, 2007; Heary and Hennessy, 2002). Contrary to Spethman (1992), Heary and Hennessy (2002) argue that the inclusion of friendship dynamics within the group may be an important factor in making children feel at ease, and thus facilitating productive discussion. Gibson (2007) argues that conversation setting is too a significant factor in determining the success of children's focus groups. School may be perceived as an advantageous setting in that the young people are on familiar turf, thus beginning to equalise the researcher-participant disparity (Gibson, 2007). However, as highlighted by

Gibson (2007) familiar settings may also lead to a replication of expected behaviours in that setting (i.e. hand raising, waiting for permission to speak in school). A further logistical consideration is presented by the need to schedule the focus group around school timetabling, homework and exams (Gibson, 2007), therefore significant thought ought to be given to how and when the conversation is conducted. A substantive discussion of how mitigated these logistical challenges within the design of the study is offered in the following section.

4.4c (v) Focus Group Design and Use

Setting

In both schools, the pupil focus groups took place during the school day, on school property, the gatekeepers having organised for the girls to miss one lesson. Conscious of this time restriction, each interview lasted just under an hour. The decision to conduct the focus groups within the school environment both the most cost-efficient option but also made the most sense logistically due to the distance between myself in Birmingham and School B. Whilst School A was significantly closer to the University, it made sense for me to also travel to the school to ensure consistency with the data produced with School B. Furthermore, conducting the focus groups on school property minimised disruption to the girl's learning timetable. Additionally, access to the participants was contingent my adherence to school safeguarding policies which would have made it incredibly difficult to conduct the sessions in a separate location.

Morgan et al (2002) question the use of focus groups with young people within school settings on the basis it risks replicating traditional teacher/pupil hierarchies within the research dynamic. Furthermore, they argue the classroom environment may encourage a 'test-taking' mentality and foster a sense that participants must perform to both the researcher and their peers (Morgan et al, 2002). This argument echoes that of Green and Hart (1999) who suggest focus groups set in schools situate the facilitator as an 'honorary teacher' and thus tend to produce more formal conversations. I was particularly conscious

of replicating this within the sessions and adopted a number of strategies to disrupt a traditional student-teacher relationship. This included asking the participants to call me by my first name, rather than 'Miss', and emphasising they did not need to raise their hands to talk during the conversation. As further highlighted by Morgan et al (2002) the seating arrangements of focus groups with young people also play a significant role. Keen to further distance the session from the traditional feeling of the classroom, I ensured I sat at the same table as the young women. In School A, this was made easier by school staff booking a meeting room for the session, allowing the participants and I to sit around a large table. In school B, the focus group took place in a classroom, however, I was able to move the individual desks and chairs around to replicate the setting of School A.

Gibson (2007) conversely argues that conducting focus groups within the school setting, may in fact disrupt researcher-participant power disparity in that the participants are 'insiders' of the school environment and are thus familiar with their surroundings. This is supported by Drever (1995) who highlights a tendency for participants to speak more confidently within their own 'territory'. Whilst I cannot definitively conclude that the participants spoke more openly than they would have in a non-school setting, both of the focus groups produced deeply insightful and rich conversations that I feel have significant value to the exploration of RSE in Catholic schools. Furthermore, I feel this study may not have been logistically viable had I chosen to conduct the study outside of the school setting.

Structure

The focus groups employed a semi-structured approach, largely as this best reflected the traditional interviewing approach used in IPA. Smith (2017) highlights the need to maintain flexibility when using a topic guide, allowing participants to talk freely and enabling the interviewer to probe where appropriate. As highlighted by Thomas (2017, p. 198), semi-structured approaches to interviewing, and thus focus groups, offer the 'best of both worlds', providing the focus on topic afforded by structured interviews whilst maintaining the more naturalistic conversation patterns of unstructured approaches. This particularly useful in IPA, in that the loose structure enables the research to guide the participants towards a focus on lived experience (Smith et al, 2009). Furthermore, semi-structured focus groups arguably make more use of the knowledge producing potential of group

conversations, by allowing some directional focus to be maintained (Brinkman, 2014). Seeking to uphold the feminist credentials of the project, this was a particularly important aim of the sessions. Building on this, I felt the semi-structured approach would best allow me to maintain a 'diffused' role within the conversation (Frey and Fontana, 1993; Wilkinson, 1998), thus placing emphasis on the voices of the young women. Thus, instead of having a rigid set of questions, I produced an 'interview schedule', or topic guide, for the focus groups (Thomas, 2017). This can be found on Appendix F (p. 342). Adopting an approach championed by Peterson-Sweeney (2005), I structured the topics to move from broader, more descriptive topics (i.e. 'tell me about your last RSE lesson') to more personal, 'sensitive' topics (i.e. what are your expectations around sex and relationships?'). Notably, this approach is adopted in reverse by Zaal et al., (2007) who advocate moving from the individual, to group, to socio-political within interview topics. This is the approach I more closely adopted in the staff interviews, as explored in section 4.4d (iii) (p. 124).

4.4d Interviewing

Across both schools, I chose to conduct one-to-one interviews with RSE teachers. These interviews ran parallel to the pupil focus groups and comprised of a purposive sample of the gatekeepers through which the pupil sample was accessed. The decision to conduct these in a one-to-one format as opposed to focus groups largely reflects the naturalistic numerical disparity between teacher and student. As the study sits as a cross-sectional insight into the lived experiences of a discrete group of pupils, it was important to me that the staff perspective came from the teacher leading their lessons – thus offering a comparative data set of teacher/pupil lived experiences of RSE within one classroom environment. The final staff interview conducted was with the Head of RE within School B, who had been a key instigator in the RSE curriculum design at the school. This interview was accessed via snowball sampling whilst on site for the planned aspects of data collection, as such, offers a 'bonus' insight into the multiple levels of lived experience of RSE within the school. This section explores the use of interviewing from two methodological perspectives: feminist research and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Building on this, I outline the decision making and design surrounding the staff interviews conducted.

4.4 (i) Interviewing within Feminist Research

There is a long-standing reverence of testimony, narrative histories and voice within feminist research (DeVault and Gross, 2012). These modes of inquiry have illuminated a vast host of otherwise marginalised and silenced stories, and therfore, are integral to feminist theory as a stand-alone field (DeVault and Gross, 2012). Interviewing, in semi and unstructured forms, therefore emerges an a central tool of feminist research (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Through the consciousness-raising movements of the late 20th century, as highlighted earlier in the chapter, feminist activists in essence began a practice of 'interviewing' themselves and other women to create meaning from their lived experiences (DeVault and Gross, 2012). Building on this, *experience* has become a core epistemological tenet of feminist scholarship, with Smith (1987) imploring an epistemic shift towards experience as the starting point. As highlighted in the previous section, the lived manifestations of gendered oppression often remain complex, covert, and as such, often unarticulated (Marshall, 1999). From a methods perspective, it is therefore important to allow space for the 'muted language' of structural oppression, the capturing of emotional or bodily signalling (Devault, In Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 203). From this perspective, the one-to-one interview is a particularly apt methods choice, creating space for nuance and non-verbal expression but also making experience audible (Devault and Gross, 2012).

Similar to focus groups, there is much discussion of the capacity to empower as a benefit of interviewing within feminist contexts. Hesse-Biber (2014) highlights that semi, and un-structured formats situate individual accounts and experiences over the research agenda, thus emboldening participant subjectivity. Similarly, Brinkman (2014) argues that the interview may allow space for participants to reflect and develop thoughts on issues they previously hadn't considered at length, particularly topics otherwise imbued with stigma or taboo. This is demonstrated in Kinsey's findings from the infamous sexuality studies of the 1940s, where interviews became a space for sexual self-discovery, reflection and problem resolution (Brinkman, 2014). In feminist contexts, the interview holds potential to disrupt the silencing of women's voice – which in of itself may be liberating (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Similarly, Reinharz (1992) deems interviewing an 'anti-dote' to the historical subjugation of women's ideas. As with focus groups, I am cautious to overstate the liberatory potential of

any research method that does not alleviate the material hurdles surrounding women's experiences (Strega, 2005). However, within a society that so often disparages women's voices, I do find the creation of space to be heard, via interviewing, to be powerful in and of itself.

4.4d (ii) Interviewing within IPA

IPA rests on the elicitation of detailed stories of experiences, emotions and inner-thoughts, and one-to-one interview enable this level of rapport to be developed and managed relatively easily (Smith et al, 2009). Whilst other methods can and have been used, such as the focus groups in this thesis, interviews are the traditional data collection method associated with IPA. (Smith et al, 2009; Reid et al, 2005). In IPA studies, as with much qualitative work, Smith et al (2009, p. 64) highlight that research questions must be approached 'sideways'. Research questions predominantly sit at an abstract level and wouldn't necessarily be effective if put to participants in that form, as such, the interview facilitates discussion of relevant topics in the participant's own words and style, which through analysis can provide substantive responses to the research questions. Fundamentally, a semi-structured interview provides the most accessible way of doing this – the provision of a loose interview schedule offers a 'map' for the researcher with which to navigate any unexpected turns in the conversation and maintain a phenomenological focus, whilst enabling the participant to bring up whatever seems important to them in the moment (Smith et al, 2009). The semi-structured topic guide used for the teacher interviews can be seen in Appendix F (p. 340).

Beyond the material practicalities of using interviewing within IPA research, the epistemological positioning of the method must too be considered. As established, IPA intertwines hermeneutics and phenomenological epistemic positions, which too have implications for the use of interviewing. As discussed, phenomenology is necessarily concerned with people's perceptions of the world or 'phenomena as people experience them' (Sloan and Bowe, 2014). Hermeneutic phenomenology, as employed in this thesis, urges *experience* led data production, thus, interviewing is a particularly key tool (Sloan and

Bowe, 2014; Creswell, 1998). This accords with the epistemological positioning of experience at the 'starting point' of inquiry within feminist work (Smith, 1987). As such, interviews were employed with staff to 'start with' the *experience* of delivering RSE in Catholic schools.

4.4d (iii) Interview Design

Setting

As the interviews took place on the same day as the pupil focus groups, they too were conducted on school property. In school A, the staff interview occurred before the pupils arrived for the focus group, whereas in school B, both teacher interviews took place afterwards. Each interview lasted for around 30 minutes, a conscious choice in the interview design as the teachers had already taken significant time out of a working day to supervise the pupil focus groups and show me around the school. The decision to conduct the teacher interviews within school, their workplace, offered both unique insights and some notable challenges. Drever (1995) highlights the advantage of participants being able to point out important parts of the schools setting to the researcher, such as resources or posters. This was an important factor in all of the staff interviews I conducted and added a further dimension to the data produced by contextualising both staff and student experiences within the physical environment of the school. However, Drever (1995) also highlights concerns that using a workplace setting for teacher interviews may result in some staff responses mirroring school policies and procedures due to the professional landscape. This is supported by Krueger (1993, p.63) who argues that it is challenging to create a 'permissive' environment within the workplace, which may further constrain some participant responses. Despite this, as stated in the prior section, imbedding all data collection within the school environment offered a unique insight into the physical school environment that would not have been afforded had a different setting been chosen.

Structure

As with the focus groups, I found a semi-structured design to be the most appropriate, allowing participants relative conversational freedom, whilst maintaining some direction and focus on the research questions (Brinkman, 2014).Within the topic guide (see appendix

F, p. 340), I followed a similar structure to Zaal et al's (2007) research flow, as used in the pupil focus groups, of moving through the individual, group and socio-political, each realm building on the previous. This allowed me to move from the teachers' individual experiences of teaching within the school, to the broader experience of teaching within the socio-political parameters of contemporary Catholic education.

4.4e Recording and Transcription

Both the focus groups and staff interviews were audio-recorded on a digital recorder, which was erased following the completion of study. The recordings were then uploaded onto the University secure data store in preparation for transcription. Transcription is an 'indispensable' aspect of qualitative research, allowing spoken word to become linguistic and experiential data (Kowal and Connell, 2014). Within IPA research, transcription is an integral step within the analytic process, both as accurate transcription enables detailed engagement with all aspects (linguistic and semantic) of participant's spoken accounts of lived experiences, and as the transcription process itself enables deep immersion with the data (Smith et al, 2009).

Despite its inherent value to qualitative research and IPA, transcription is broadly recognised as a time-intensive and laborious aspect of research (McMullin, 2021). As a result, there is an increasing role for assistive technologies in transcription (McMullin, 2021). AI transcription significant grew in popularity throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, whereby the use of transcription features of video conferencing software such as Zoom or MS Teams became common place (Dodds & Hess, 2020). Due to the significant delays in data collection (see Table 6, p. 94), I chose to use Otter.Ai to produce initial transcriptions as this allowed more time for analysis. Whilst AI technologies are now largely advanced enough to produce fairly accurate first transcriptions, there is still significant capacity for error, thus McMullin (2021) advises detailed scrutiny and correction of any transcripts produced. There are a lot of potentially important aspects of speech AI cannot capture, most obviously non-verbal cues, tone and body language (McMullin, 2021). Furthermore, as I found, AI software often struggles to interpret multiple people speaking over each other and regional accents (Bokhove and Downey, 2018). As such, the researcher must still engage significantly with

the recording and edit the transcript accordingly to ensure all aspects of conversational data are captured.

The need to correct and enrich AI produced transcripts meant that I was able to preserve opportunities for data immersion usually facilitated by manual transcription (Smith et al, 2009). As such, I listened to each interview and focus group recording multiple times and worked through individual transcripts correcting or embellishing with missed details (i.e. laughter, tone, hesitation, murmuring) as I went. Recognising each of the individual voices of the young women was also a particular concern given the application of IPA. I therefore listened to the pupil focus groups several times, with some listening sessions solely focused on identifying speakers and ensuring their speech was labelled correctly throughout. To maintain data security, recordings and transcripts were permanently removed from the Otter.Ai servers as soon as transcriptions were produced and were then stored on the University of Birmingham's secure data store.

4.5 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Design and Process

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is an approach to qualitative analysis that seeks to gain understanding of people's lived experience of the world. IPA was conceptualised in the 1990s within health psychology, as a means to capture and analyse rich interpersonal data whilst remaining in-conversation with the wider quantitatively focused research community (Smith et al, 2009). Smith (1996) initially advocated for IPA as a beneficial technique within health-psychology in that it offered an alternative to the dominant positivist research orientation of psychological inquiry. Crucially, IPA posed an innovative challenge to social psychology's 'methodological commitment to quantification' when investigating peoples' innermost mental states by incorporating tactics gleaned from discourse analysis (Smith, 1996, p. 262). In Smith's (1996, p. 262) words, discourse analysis functions to examine the 'interactive tasks being performed by verbal statements'. In other terms, discourse analysis offers an examination of the ways in our speech and text interacts with broader social narratives and structures. IPA does not necessarily share the commitment to deconstruction offered by discourse analysis , but rather aims for a specific

focus on how individuals experience, understand, express and relate to key life events or phenomena (Smith et al, 2009).

IPA is grounded within an interpretivist methodological position; constituting knowledge as revealed through the lived experiences and perspectives of people (Smith et al, 2009; Schwandt, 1994). As established in section 4.3b (p. 91), IPA draws most centrally on two branches of interpretivist epistemology, phenomenology and hermeneutics (Smith et al, 2009). In turn, this too reflects the philosophical orientation of this thesis. The former methodological approach is concerned with 'capturing actors' points of view' whilst the latter, stemming from biblical hermeneutics, concerns the interpreter (researcher) drawing out 'readings' of the language and meanings of social action (Schwandt, 1994). In turn, IPA centres the lived experience of participants as a core means to understand their lived-world, whilst recognising knowledge production as a two-fold process, developed both through the participants' interpretation of their experiences and through the researcher own perception of those experiences (King-Hill, 2013). This provides an optimum analytic strategy in my attempt to centre the voices and lived experiences of young women within Catholic RSE.

IPA is well-suited for small-scale studies that yield verbatim, experience focused data from the participants (King-Hill, 2013). These qualities are particularly advantageous in the exploration of intimate topics, as shown in the significant body of works exploring sexuality, identity, sexual health and gender through the use of IPA (Lavie and Willig, 2005; Free et al, 2005; Flowers et al, 2000). Flower's work (1998; 2000; 2003) exploring gay men's navigation of sex, relationships and sexual health has been particularly formative in developing the use of IPA in sexuality studies. Whilst much of the research in this area reflects a sexual-health standpoint, works such as Coyle and Rafalin (2001) employ IPA to explore the interaction between sexual identity and faith, specifically, the identities of Jewish, gay men. Within this work, IPA enables radical reflexivity of both researcher's positionalities in relation to their participants, as a non-Jewish gay man, and a Jewish heterosexual woman (Coyle and Rafalin, 2001). Furthermore, there is a small, but developing, body of work that seeks to employ IPA within an explicitly feminist framework (Clifford et al, 2019; Cohen et al, 2021). I am particularly compelled by Cohen et al's (2021) work that directly integrates IPA and feminist standpoint theory. Overall, it is this capacity for attention to the complex expressions of

sexual identity and relationships to social structures that attracted me to IPA as an analytic approach for the present study.

In application, IPA is characterised by a rigorous analytic process that enables a move from 'the particular to the shared…the descriptive to the interpretative' and centralises personal meaning making (Smith et al, 2009, p. 79). Smith et al (2009) offer a six-stage comprehensive framework for conducting IPA. The stages, drawn from chapter 5 (Smith et al, 2009) are displayed in the table below, alongside details of how I adapted and applied each stage within the analysis of the staff interviews and pupil focus groups.

Table 9: Stages of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Step	Description of Work Required	Application in Present Study
1. *Immersion in the data.*	Re-reading and listening to the interview as a means to centre the participant and actively engage the researcher within their worldview. Crucially, this step attempts to avoid typical research habits of overly condensing or synthesising participants experience for the purpose of quicker analysis.	**Transcription Process** As outlined in section 4.4e (p. 124), I listened to audio recordings of the interviews and focus groups multiple times before beginning analysis to ensure the transcripts accurately reflected the participants speech.
2. *Exploratory examination of semantics and language used by participant.*	Close to a 'free textual analysis', no specific rules on content to be highlighted, rather aim is to create a comprehensive set of comments and initial thoughts on the data (Smith et al, 2009, p. 83). Smith et al (2009) demonstrate this process by delineating three distinct lines of commentary; descriptive, linguistic and conceptual which could be emphasised by use of different colours/underlining etc within the same transcript– however, they highlight that these discrete categories are not prescriptive.	**Analysis Stage 1** Stage 1 of my analysis of both the focus groups and interviews comprised steps 2 and 3 of Smith et al's (2009) advocated process. I adopted the table format advocated used by Smith et al's (2009). However, due to the scale of transcript data , I chose to input this into a word-document rather than hand-writing reflections and emergent themes on a paper copy of the transcript. An example of this for T2's interview is seen in Appendix H (p. 346). For the pupil focus groups, I employed a colour coding system to delineate which emergent themes related to different participants. An example of this for the School A focus group is shown in Appendix G (p. 345).
3. *Development of emerging themes.*	The focus of this stage of analysis is both the transcript itself, and the additional layers of initial notation from stage two. This represents an attempt to reduce the volume of data, collating central themes within the localised context of sections of the transcript. This is the first integration of the interpretative aspect of IPA, moving somewhat away from a specific focus on the	

	participant to include the positionality and perspective of the researcher. This involves condensing key exploratory comments into concise representations as to what the researcher perceives is happening/represented in the transcript.	
4. *Mapping connections between themes.*	This involves collating or categorising themes into clusters of related themes to examine how they relate to each other – thus producing 'Superordinate Themes'. Smith et at (2009) list numerous models for examining these relationships including abstraction (identifying thematic patterns), numeration (looking at frequency of themes), and polarization (looking for difference).	**Analysis Stage 2** Smith et al (2009) recommend manually sorting emergent themes into superordinate themes using small bits of paper on a large surface. I initially began using this approach, but it was found to be untenable for the focus groups due to the sheer number of emergent themes produced in each group. Instead, I then inserted the emergent themes for each case (interview or focus group) PowerPoint documents, which replicated the large surface area (See Appendices I and J for example). I was then able to manipulate and sort the themes into superordinate themes, predominantly using abstraction to identify commonalities.
5. *Moving on to the next.*	The first four steps offer the foundational framework for analysing one case (one interview/transcript), yet as most studies will have multiple cases, the final two steps for IPA offer means to synthesise and compare a series of transcripts. This stage presents a challenge in that the researcher must treat each new case as its own entity, and whilst inevitability they will be influenced by the findings of the prior case, original and new themes must be allowed to develop. This is where the rigorous nature of IPA comes into play, maintaining the same steps are used for each case.	**Analysis Stage 3** Before moving onto a new case, I presented superordinate themes for each teacher in a table, alongside constitutive emergent themes and participant quotes. This stage also supported the writing process for Chapters Five to Seven by grouping all the key quotes for each superordinate theme in one place. Stage three tables for the teacher participants can be seen in appendix M (p. 407). As the pupil focus groups were analyses as singular cases, comprising of multiple participants, the stage three tables (appendices L and M, p. 381 onwards) display master themes created through abstraction of individual participant themes established in stage. These are displayed alongside colour-code emergent participant themes and quotations, to ensure individual young women's experiences can be traced. As such, for the focus groups, stage 3 represented an amalgamation of Smith and colleagues (2009) steps 4-6. Master themes were colour coded to

6. *Looking for overall patterns.*	This final step examines the themes and data from each case to look for commonalities, relationships and divergence across the study as a whole. This bolsters a move towards a more theoretical analysis, as themes emerge within cases that share contextual qualities – or in fact offer unique idiosyncrasies. The final result is then displayed, most commonly in a table or graphic.	**Analysis Stage 4** In order to synthesise themes across the two focus groups, I added an additional stage of synthesising master themes produced across the two groups. Through this additional level of abstraction, I produced five 'overarching' themes, which reflect experiences of the young women across both focus groups. These are displayed in Appendix N (p. 435). These overarching themes shaped the structure of Chapters Six and Seven.

Adapted from Smith et al, (2009, pp.82-101).

4.6 Ethics

4.6a Ethical Approval

This study received ethical approval from the University of Birmingham Ethics Committee. See appendix A (p. 305 onwards) for more information.

4.6b Ethical Research with Young People

'If children's and young people's realities, experiences and perceptions are not explored first hand, an important body of evidence remains unknown, and they are being denied their right to input into matters which affect them.' (Brady and Graham, 2018 p.64).

Research involving children and young people presents 'more pronounced' ethical concerns compared to adult focused studies (Brady and Graham, 2018, p. 59). Brady and Graham (2018) attribute this to the vulnerability of children, the potential for adult exploitation, and the young people's comparative lack of familiarity with the research process. In this section I will address the central issues in ensuring ethical research with young people, and how I mitigated unethical practice within the current study.

4.6b (i) Minimising Harm

As identified by Brady and Graham (2018), there are a number of dominant issues surrounding the minimisation of harm in research with children and young people; safeguarding, mitigating emotional distress and ensuring benefit.In terms of safeguarding, the authors suggest developing or adapting existing safeguarding policies to outline what processes will be taken if a disclosure of harm is made during the research process (Brady and Graham, 2018). I made the decision to adhere to each individual school's safeguarding procedures, and ensured gatekeepers, parents and pupils themselves were aware of this within the preliminary information sheets. Due to school safeguarding policies, a teacher (in both cases, the gatekeeper and key staff contact I had at the school) was also present in the room during the focus groups, however, ensured they sat separately to minimise disruption to the conversation. Brady and Graham (2018) also highlight the need for DBS clearance, which I obtained before undertaking the fieldwork.

Mitigating emotional distress is of even more importance in the context of 'sensitive topic research'. As discussed in section 4.4c (i) (p. 108), defining what constitutes 'sensitive' is challenging, and the process by which certain topics are defined as such is highly politicised. This is even more true of defining sensitive research with children – as highlighted by a participant in Powell and Smith's (2009, p.128) study '*I get the feeling sometimes that asking children about any topic is considered sensitive*.' This aside, topics deemed to be more controversial or potentially more upsetting certainly have ethical implications as to the conduct of studies with children and young people. Powell and Smith (2009) argue sensitive topic research faces greater barriers in terms of young people's access to participation. As highlighted in section 4.4b (p. 106), there may be multiple layers of gatekeepers who may deem sensitive research to be unsuitable or not in keeping with YP's best interests. Certainly, there are valid concerns in this area beyond perceived inappropriate topics – many sensitive topics may present a risk of re-traumatisation for young people or present opportunity for safeguarding disclosures to be made. However, Powell and Smith (2009) argue that excluding children from sensitive topic research on these grounds is paradoxical. They argue that disclosures or re-traumatisation could occur in many situations in young peoples' lives and having them arise in a controlled situation such

as research, when proper safeguarding principles are followed, may enable the participants to access support services and for concerns to be addressed (Powell and Smith, 2009). Additionally, the authors argue that not participating could in fact have greater consequences – being denied the opportunity to participate and have their voice heard, not accessing support, and being denied the empowerment of telling their story (Powell and Smith, 2009). Crucially, Brady and Graham (2018) emphasise that increased ethical consideration should not constitute an excuse to exclude children and young people's voices. Thus, it is of utmost importance that proper strategies for emotional support, service signposting and appropriate questioning techniques are in place to ensure young people's voices on 'sensitive' issues remain heard.

Brady and Graham (2018) offer some practical consideration to mitigate emotional distress in work with young people. Namely, they emphasise the need for researchers to anticipate which topics might evoke emotional responses and monitor for signs of distress as they occur (Brady and Graham, 2018). Additionally, the authors advocate for continuous emphasis on taking breaks and consent principles within questions (Brady and Graham, 2018). I adopted this by pre-facing more challenging questions with phrases such as 'you don't have to answer this if you don't feel comfortable'. As part of the introduction to each session, I also stated the participants could stop or pause the conversation at any time and were not required to provide answers if they did not feel comfortable (see Appendix F, p. 342). Brady and Graham (2018) also suggest providing a 'help sheet', with a list of services and resources that may help the participants navigate any particular areas of upset or distress that come up during or after the research. I implemented this by providing a comprehensive list of youth focused sexual health, sexual violence and mental health organisations within the information sheet provided to the young women (See Appendix E, p. 336).

4.6b (ii) Informed Consent

In the UK, the process of gaining informed consent from children and young people is shaped by several notable legal requirements. The research precedent surrounding young people's capacity to provide consent predominantly borrows from medical law (Powell and

Smith, 2009). Thus, broadly young people over the age of 16 are assumed to have full adult capacity to consent, whilst those under 16 are not, therefore parental permission is required. (Brady and Graham, 2018, p. 73). However, the 1982 Gillick Case determined that, in medical settings, young people under the age of 16 can consent to medical treatment if they are deemed 'competent' and understand the implications of the treatment. This represents a move towards the enshrinement of young people's need for autonomy. In 1991, the UK ratified the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the child (UNCRC) (1989), thus legally protecting children and young people's rights to information and the need for robust consent procedures (Alderson and Morrow, 2011). The British Education Research Association (2024) advises that in line with article 12 of the UNCRC, children should be facilitated to give their full informed consent, and where they may not have full capacity to consent, researchers must also seek the collaboration and/or approval of parents and carers. As the young women in the study were all under 16, I sought parental permission via opt-out consent forms, sent home with pupils alongside comprehensive information sheets. I chose opt-out formulations as I wanted to position young women's autonomy (via opt in, voluntary consent forms) over adult voices. I included providing these forms and discussing it with parents/carers as one of stipulations of participating in the pupil consent form. No parents chose to opt their daughters out of the study, so I did not receive any forms back.

Soliciting informed consent is highly tied to supporting dignity and autonomy for young people (Brady and Graham, 2018), and was integral to the project. It must be further emphasized that in studies accessing young people through institutions and other adults, as this research did, that gatekeeper consent alone is not sufficient (Brady and Graham, 2018). As such, I emphasised within the information sheet, consent sheet (see Appendix E, p. 335), and verbally at the start of each focus group that participation was entirely voluntary. Children and young people have largely been socialised to do what adults tell them – therefore, it is critically important to emphasise that the decision to participate lies with them alone (Brady and Graham, 2018).

Staff participants were also provided with comprehensive information sheets and consent forms prior to participating in the interviews (See Appendix D, p. 332).

4.6b (iii) Confidentiality

BERA (2018) state that unless participants have, with full knowledge, waived their right to confidentiality, it should be taken as a normative standard within education research. This is of even more important when working with children and young people (Brady and Graham, 2018). Pseudonyms have been used for the pupils, staff and schools throughout all of the transcriptions, analysis and discussion. A key of participant's real names was kept on the university secure data store, only accessible to me, to enable data withdrawal prior to a cut-off point. All identifiable data, such as details of other participants or the location of the school, have been removed from the transcripts and analysis. All participants were made aware of these confidentiality procedures via the information sheets, prior to consenting to be involved.

4.6c Data Storage and Right to Withdraw

In accordance with the UK GDPR law (2018) and BERA's (2024) ethical guidelines for research, all identifiable 'raw' data was password protected and stored on a laptop only accessible by me. Raw data, including recordings and transcripts prior to pseudonymization, were not stored on cloud services as this is not GDPR compliant. Both pupils and staff were made aware of the data storage plan prior to consenting to the research.

The information sheets and consent forms provide to the young women and staff highlighted the right to withdraw from the study at any point prior to a cut-off point (See Appendices D and E). It was also emphasised that any data or personal details they have provided to the researcher will be destroyed in accordance with the University of Birmingham data management guidance and the British Educational Research Association (2024) guidance on education research data storage. The cut-off point was set to be prior to the start of any analytic processes, because after that the removal of data would have been much more complicated. As part of the consent form, participants were asked to confirm

whether they understand their right to and the procedure to withdraw from the study (see Appendices D and E).

4.7 Summary

Chapter Four has outlined the overarching research philosophy and design underpinning a qualitative investigation of young women and teacher experiences of Catholic RSE. A summary of these methodological choices, and their role in supporting the investigation of the central RQs of this thesis is offered in the table below. The research questions addressed through this methodology are as follows:

1. How do Catholic sexual values intersect with statutory RSE requirements in Catholic schools?
2. What are young women's lived experiences of statutory RSE in Catholic schools?
3. Does RSE delivered in Catholic schools reflect and meet the current needs of young women in England?
4. How do the experiences of staff delivering RSE in Catholic schools collude or contrast with young women's experiences?

Table 10: Summary of Methodology and Research Design

Key Methodological Choices	Application to RQs
Feminist Research Ethos (section 4.2, p. 82 onwards)	Young women's lived experiences and voices are centred throughout RQ 2-4. By adopting a feminist methodological lens, these RQs are driven by the aim of challenging the historic marginalisation of women's voices and experiences within knowledge production. Further, the research design employed to address these questions is informed by principles of reflexivity within feminist research. In turn, I understand my response to the overarching RQs in this thesis as shaped by my positionality and proximity to power structures.

Constructivist Ontology (section 4.3a, p. 90)	All four RQs were developed with an understanding of 'reality' as produced through experience and social context.
'Braided' Epistemology: Feminist Standpoint Theory, Phenomenology and Hermeneutics (section 4.3b, p. 90)	The exploration of all four RQs within this thesis is underpinned an epistemic understanding of young women's standpoint in relation to social structures and lived experiences as the starting point of knowledge production. Drawing on phenomenology, and hermeneutics, I also understand the knowledge produced through the RQs as shaped by human experience and interpretation. This 'braided' epistemology reflects an integration of feminist research with IPA. This methodological lens has been scantly adopted in education research and offers a unique framework through which the data in this thesis can be understood.
Critical/Constructivist Axiology (section 4.3c, p. 98)	All four RQs were designed and addressed with a view of human values as instinct to and inseparable from the research process. The RQs and the research design employed to addressed were developed with explicit consideration of ethical implications, and an interest in tackling societal injustice.
Purposive and Theoretical Sampling (section 4.4b, p. 103)	The RQs identify young women and teachers in Catholic secondary schools as the primary research population. A purposive and theoretical approach was used as the phenomenological focus of the RQs did not necessitate a generalisable sample. As such, the study population was determined by theoretical interest in the specific experiences of a number of young women in Catholic contexts. Sample size was constrained by the adoption of focus groups and IPA, which necessitate small numbers. As such, 11 young women ages 13-14, and three teachers took part in the study.
Recruitment Through 'Gatekeepers' (section 4.4b, p. 106)	Due to the age of the primary research population within the RQs (young women), access and recruitment was facilitated by gatekeepers (teacher participants) in each school.

Focus groups with Young Women (section 4.4c, p. 108)	Semi-structured focus groups were employed to support the exploration of young women's lived experiences (RQs 2-4). Focus groups were selected due to their capacity to facilitate openness and validation in sensitive topic research, and to enable collective meaning making within feminist approaches. The decision to use focus groups also reflects the aim of disrupting adult-child dynamics by alleviating pressure on individual participants and limiting the researcher to a diffuse presence in the conversation. In applying IPA to focus group data, this work contributes to a small but developing area of research adapting IPA for group-based studies.
Teacher Interviews (section 4.4d, p. 120)	Semi-structured interviews were used to solicit teacher lived experiences (RQ 4). The decision to employ one-to-one interviews with staff reflects the natural disparity between student and teacher numbers within the class-groups studied. This choice reflects a long tradition of interviews within feminist research and is the traditional data collection method adopted within IPA studies.
Recording and transcription (section 4.4e, p. 124)	Transcription of the interviews and focus group recordings supports responses to all four RQs by enabling accurate engagement with participant accounts of their experiences. Transcription also facilitates the depth of data-engagement required by the IPA process.
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (section 4.5, p. 125)	IPA was adopted as the central analytic framework for the study as it's explicitly phenomenological focus supports the emphasis on lived experience within RQs 2-4. It is also well suited for rich insight into the experiences of a small sample of participants. Further, IPA recognises data as produced through participant and researcher interpretations, which accords with the reflexive, feminist methodology underpinning this research.
Ethical Considerations for Research with Young People (section 4.6, p. 129)	As young women are the principal focus of the RQs, the research design employed was

	driven by the principles of minimising harm , supporting informed consent, and maintaining robust confidentiality within research with children and young people.

Chapter Five: Teachers' Lived Experiences of Statutory RSE Delivery in Catholic Schools

'Are we teaching them what they need to know for life?' (T3)

5.1 Introduction

This chapter offers findings from semi-structured interviews with teachers (n=3) across the two research schools (see Table 8, p. 107). Staff data was originally intended to enable the identification of gaps between schools' intentions of RSE delivery, and the subsequent lived experiences of young women. However, through using IPA, the teacher interviews provided critical insight into the emotional and professional demands of RSE on educators, particularly in religious contexts. In turn, this chapter offers a rich insight into three teachers' attempts to consolidate their own lived experiences, social positionality, pedagogies, and faith with school structures and RSE policy landscapes.

Smith et al (2009) advocates for the simultaneous presentation of findings and discussion for IPA studies, as such, participant findings are contextualised against existing literature throughout. The chapter is organised into six master themes that were found through synthesising superordinate themes across all three participants interviews. As discussed in Table 9 (p. 127), superordinate themes were developed by thematically grouping emergent experiential themes from the transcripts of each individual teacher interview on a PowerPoint document (see appendix J, p. 348). Superordinate themes from all three interviews were then thematically grouped to create the master themes shown in the table below. A detailed breakdown of the superordinate themes and corresponding transcript sections is offered in appendix M (p. 407 onwards).

Table 11: Superordinate and Master Themes for Teachers

School A	School B	School B
T1	T2	T3
DESIRE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE		
Catalysts for change	RSE as site of social change	RSE as fulfilling
Proactive response to sexual harassment in school	Informed by lived experience of relationships	Worried about daughters' safety

Dissatisfaction with Current Approach	Motivated by need to prepare pupils for life	Desire to change harmful sexual culture
	Evolving treatment of unplanned pregnancy	Desire to make difference in young women's lives
	Rejection of gender segregation	School values as motivation for RSE
		RSE as preparation for life
		Shaped by own experiences of sex ed
		Ambition to improve delivery
PUPIL (DIS)ENGAGEMENT		
Socio-economic factors of pupil affecting ability to engage with them.	Tension between aims and pupil perspectives	Student voice as catalyst for change
Need for work to be adaptive	Perceives RSE as catalyst for inappropriate behaviour	Witness to change in pupil experiences
Feeling heard by pupils	Pupil Engagement contingent on topic.	Positive relationships with parents
Witness to deterioration of pupil relationships post-covid.	Observing gendered differences	
Relationship to pupils affects practice	Mistrust of pupil ability to find information	
	Responsivity to pupil voice	
	Witnessing social and academic delay in pupils	
	Resistance to pupil boundaries	
CONFLICTED RELATIONSHIP TO CATHOLICISM		
Catholic lens as route to good practice	Questioning own belonging in faith	Distancing from conservative sexual values
Catholic sexual values as unattainable	Forging own religious identity	Tension with Catholic sexual ethics
Gospel values as aspirational	Distancing from conservative Catholicism	Catholic education as distinct
Sense of failing LGBTQ+ and contraceptive needs due to ideological tension	Moral anxiety	Mistrust of other faith schools
Varied pupil reception of Catholic teaching	Distancing from secular practice	School as site of religious experience
School A	**School B**	**School B**
T1	**T2**	**T3**
RELATIONSHIP TO ROLE		
Time Deprivation	Structural change post-stat RSE	Workload pressure
Stress tied to implementation of statutory guidance	Impact of covid on experience of teaching	Inspection Anxiety
Importance of Boundaries	Distancing from responsibility	Confidence in school delivery

	Confidence rooted in experience	Statutory policy as catalyst for change
	Need for boundaries	Frustration with other school approaches
	Training as catalyst for confidence.	Desire for control
		Need for tailored resources
		Aware of hostile climate
TEAM IDENTITY AND RELATIONSHIPS		
Feeling the strain of supporting other staff members	Unified staff identity.	Strong team identity
Lack of Confidence in other staff members' ability	Feeling supported by colleagues	Lack of confidence in other staff
Situating self as transforming RSE	Understands RE department as RSE specialists	Personal history with school
BARRIERS TO DELIVERY		
Unprepared in navigating current sexuality and gender landscape	Conscious of gaps in inclusivity	Frustration with gaps in policy
Constrained by wider cultures of misogyny	Feeling constrained by diocese	Frustration with other school approaches
Barriers to changing school culture	Frustration with education policy landscape	
	Need to fill gaps in resources	
	Teaching hindered by resources	

Throughout the discussion within this chapter, supporting participant quotations are offered in italics, and are colour coded for enhanced clarity. T1's is represented by blue text, T2 by red text, and T3 by green text. Line references are offered following quotes and refer to the stage one transcripts (see example in Appendix H, p. 346). Principally, this chapter serves to answer the RQ 1 'how do Catholic sexual values intersect with statutory RSE requirements in Catholic schools?'. However, the staff experiences presented in this chapter will also partially address RQ 4 'how do the experiences of staff delivering RSE in Catholic schools collude or contrast with young women's experiences?', although this will be more substantively explored in Chapter 7.

5.2 Desire to Make a Difference

All participants highlighted a desire to make a difference in pupil's lives through RSE delivery. To varying degrees, the teachers often anchored this desire to evoke change within their own lived experiences and perceptions of sexual cultures, relationships, and gender-based violence.

> T1*: 'like if we want to eliminate things like Sarah Everard, it's better education. Yeah, we need to make sure we've got that.'*
> T2: '*I'm like [name] one day that [menopause] is going to happen to me, yeah, I'm gonna want to talk to you, he's like 'no it's woman stuff'*
> T3: *'it's worrying, like, yeah, I've got two little girls at home…when I'm thinking about all the information we're giving out, I've almost got them in my head'*

The interviews occurred in the months following the murder of Sarah Everard , who was killed in March 2021 by a serving police officer as she walked home, sparking a 'moment of reckoning' with systemic male violence against women (Topping, 2022). As such, the conversations were framed within a climate of heightened concern and public discourse surrounding harmful sexual cultures and violence against women and girls (Topping, 2022). For T1, the Everard case represented a clear illustration of the need for comprehensive RSE and appeared to motivate a desire to develop and improve the school's current provision. T3 anchored his discussion on the need to tackle rising sexual harassment faced by young women within the lens of his fears for own his daughter's safety. In doing so, T3 positions his lived experience as a father to girls as core driving factor in his approach to RSE delivery. Whilst not displaying the same focus on GBV, T2 similarly grounds her motivations to deliver RSE in her lived experience of gendered relationships outside of teaching. In highlighting her boyfriend's discomfort and unwillingness to discuss the menopause and menstruation, she positions her own relationship as a model of the consequences of failing to adequately educate men and boys about periods (Erchull, 2010).

Whilst all teaching practice is likely shaped by the life experiences of pupils and teachers alike, the role of personhood appears particularly apparent in the context of RSE. Just as personal 'baggage' (Arendell, 1997, p.343) shapes the research process, it also plays a significant role in shaping RSE practice. Unlike other academic subject matter, proximity to relationships and sex is a near unavoidable facet of human life. As argued by Lodge et al (2022, p.5), RSE makes visible 'deep-rooted tensions between the private, individual, and family domains and the public, political and cultural'. In turn, the rationale for RSE delivery becomes entangled with practitioners' lived experiences and perceptions of sex, relationships, gender, and violence. As noted by participants in Cumper et al (2023), the role of personal experiences in shaping how individual teachers approach RSE can make achieving consistency, even within a singular school, extremely challenging.

A desire to make a difference through RSE delivery was further expressed through a construction of RSE as a key mechanism of social change:

> T2*: 'how's that [gender segregated RSE lessons] ever going to, like, it's gonna make it more of a taboo, and how is that going to help with, with [period] poverty?'*
>
> T3: *'We've had all this delivery now of sexual harassment and how it shouldn't be happening. Are the experiences of young women in our school changing?'*

For T2, the current school approach to RSE represents a key tool in tackling period poverty, principally in offering a means to challenge taboo and open conversation for all genders. This is juxtaposed by her description of her boyfriend's unwillingness to discuss 'woman stuff', which she constructs as a consequence historic failure to facilitate menstrual educations for boys and men (Erchull, 2010). For T3, evoking positive change in young women's lives is construed as a core barometer for the success of RSE in the school. In turn, RSE is functionally constructed as a subject that seeks to materialise social change in pupils'

lives. Social change as a motivating factor is also reflected in De Haas and Hutte's (2019) study of sex education teachers in Uganda, whereby sex education delivery was understood as a means of breaking poverty cycles. Whilst De Haas and Hutte's study is situated is a significantly different geographic and socio-political context, the participants in the present research share a pedagogical grounding in the desire to evoke change in young people's lives.

T2 and T3's drive to evoke difference in pupils' lives was further driven by the founding principle of their school, distinct to the subsect of Catholic schools it falls under, 'teach them what they need to know for life'. For both, this maxim appears to represent both a clear, moral justification of the need for RSE delivery, and a construction of RSE as a means to make a meaningful difference in pupils' lives.

> T2: *'St. Julia as our founder, she was the one who says, you know 'teaching what they need for life'. Which is, you know, the approach that we're going for.'*
>
> T3: *'that is the foundation of our personal development curriculum. Are we teaching them what they need to know for life?'*

Both teachers identify this founding principle as a framework through which RSE in School B is designed and delivered. T3 goes somewhat further in phrasing the principle as a question, in turn, constructing it as a means of quality-checking curricular content and delivery. As found by Abbott, Ellis, and Abbott (2016) teachers often seek to align sex education practice with existing philosophies and ethos as a means of providing a sense of legitimacy to the subject. Perhaps most notably, through referencing the school's founding principles, both teachers demonstrate congruence between the distinct religious positionality of the school, and motivations for RSE delivery. As will be explored in the latter sections of this chapter, the ability for staff at School A and B to rationalise RSE as a necessary part of the Catholic ethos of the school significantly sets them apart from broader narratives on the compatibility of faith schools and sex education. Furthermore, for both Teachers Two and

Three, the founding principle represents an understanding of preparation for adulthood as the primary function of RSE provision. In turn, both participants perceive themselves to be involved in creating life-long change for young people. It is notable that the sentiment of St. Julia's message is somewhat echoed in the secretary of state foreword for the statutory RSE guidance, which situates the overarching aim of the changes as helping young people to become 'successful and happy adults who make a meaningful contribution to society' (Department of Education, 2019, p. 5). This suggests congruence between secular and Catholic educational philosophies.

T2 and 3's construction of RSE as preparation for adulthood also appears deeply entwined with their understanding of young people as learners:

> T2: *'so this is what's available to you, you need to make your own decision')*
> *''If you're going to enter into this, then you need to be aware of all the consequences'*
> T3: *'it's trying to get them to make good decisions'*
> *'what we want is for them to be educated to use them [phones] in a good and positive way'*

The rhetoric of personal responsibility presented by both staff members reflects a neoliberal pedagogy, as highlighted by Jones (2011), that constructs learners as 'informed decision makers. Sex education in this format functions as information provision, after which the onus is on young people to exercise personal choice to make 'healthy' choices.

5.3 Pupil (Dis)engagement

For all three teachers, pupil engagement in lessons emerged as a central determinant factor in their relationship to RSE. As fieldwork was conducted in 2021, in the months after the final lockdown, staff perceptions of pupil engagement were heavily framed through a lens of

COVID-19 and its subsequent impact on young people. All three teachers reported a deterioration in pupil engagement post-covid, both in terms of learning and with peer relationships, which significantly shaped the experience of teaching.

> T1: *'it felt like a little bit Lord of the Flies, because the kids were always against each other, they were so competitive'*
> T2: '*passive learners, you can't blame 'em, they've had like two years of online learning.'*
> *'they don't really have those skills still, 'cuz their last year in school would've been year nine.'*
> T3: *'the social side of it has changed so much, because so much of their interaction happens online.'*
> *'your relationship with people online, and how [pause] people feel anonymous, and they feel like they can say whatever they want and do whatever they want, and that's had a big impact on a lot of students'*

As explored in section 3.2d (p. 61), the government response to the pandemic resulted in significant and sporadic disruption across English schools (Timmins, 2021). Schools were forced to rapidly shift to online learning, and then adapt to a highly inconsistent policy landscape once re-opened (Howard et al, 2021). Even where schools re-opened for face-to-face learning, the introduction of year-group bubbles and self-isolation periods meant that young peoples social and educational landscapes were drastically changed (Howard et al, 2021). The teachers' observations of behavioural changes in pupils following this period accords with Horan et al's (2023) study, in which teachers reported a significant breakdown in pupils' relational skills and learning engagement post-Covid, particularly for Year 7s who had missed critical development points at the end of primary school. For all three participants, these changes were framed as the rationale for an adaptive RSE curriculum and tailored teaching strategies to meet new pupil needs, including a renewed focus on mental health and online safety.

T1: *'The first year, so 2020, it was really, um, [pause] mental health.'*

T2: *'we've got a culture of passive learners these days. They would rather just listen, move on to the next one, or they'd rather just sit there take a little bit in and move on to the next'*

'we want them to get confident to speak to people, rather than just what they find from Google'

T3*: 'we did a lot during COVID on online safety, we tried to push that during it.'*

Whilst Teachers One and Three situate RSE as a key vehicle through which students in their schools could be supported during the pandemic, research suggests the subject was significantly deprioritised in many schools during this period (Heyes, 2020; Horan et al, 2023). The long-term impact of COVID-19 on young peoples' developmental and social needs is unaddressed, and subsequent need for adaptive RSE content and delivery remain wholly unaddressed within the updated draft guidance (Department for Education, 2024b). This suggests that the true extent of the effect of COVID-19 on young people, and RSE delivery has not yet been sufficiently recognised at a policy level. Further, this indicates a pertinent area for on-going investigation within RSE research. Finally, both T2 and T3 construction young peoples' increased reliance on online resources as a negative outcome of the pandemic, highlighting a need to encourage engagement with 'in real life' advice and information, and a increased need for education on online safety. As explored in section 7.5b (ii) (p. 262 onwards), this construction fails to capture the more nuance role of social media and online learning in the young women's navigating of sexuality, identity and relationships.

For T1, the experience of delivering RSE varied significantly depending on the student group, and perceived differences in engagement between groups:

T1: *'it very much varies depending on what group I've got, and the students in that room'*

'I think I find it easy when I've got a relationship already with that class. Yeah, it's amazing'

'people coming in from like, outside areas, and, um, they'd had a lot more experience in terms of like sex and drugs…but they were a lot more aware of things like, um, [pause] sex and the pressures around sex. Whereas I think that most of the group I've got this year haven't.'

'at the moment, I've got a triple science top set that I teach, got two of those... And they're, um, I would say, they're a lot more conservative.'

For T1, RSE delivery is understood as a relational process, whereby teaching is made easier and more enjoyable by pre-existing relationships with students. In highlighting this experience, she alludes to a version of RSE teaching that is strained by a lack of established connected with the class. Her reference to the 'room' suggests an embodied experience of the RSE classroom that changes depending on the presence of different students. Notably, whilst T1 broadly identified herself as 'comfortable' and confident in delivering RSE (section 5.6, p. 166), these reflections demonstrate these feelings as highly contingent on her relationship to pupils in the room. Interestingly, she reports a perceived difference in subject engagement between students from different socio-economic backgrounds, attributing this to students from outside the school catchment areas having more lived experience of sex and drugs. This appears to implicitly refer to young people from working class, urban areas, given the school's location in an affluent, suburban neighbourhood. She contrasts this group against a top-set science class which she perceives to be more socially conservative, and as less sexually knowing. Notably, whilst some research has found earlier sexual debut to be correlated with more deprived socio-economic background (Palmer et al, 2019), there is scant existing research to substantiate or disprove her claim.

It is pertinent to critically engage with the social narratives that may compound T1's perception of students' sexual knowledge. In tying academic performance to sexual experience, T1 draws on notions of youth sexuality as antithetical to academic and economic success (see section 2.5a, p.32). Considering the implied socio-economic disparity between the student groups, T1's statement can be seen to intersect with hypersexualised constructions of low-income and racially minoritized young women (Tolman, 2002) and constructions of adolescent sexuality, and its potential consequences of unplanned pregnancy, as a threat to expected life trajectories of middle-class young women (Walkerdine et al, 2001). Further, in delineating these two pupil groups, T1 echoes Abbott, Ellis and Abbott's (2016, p.684) findings, whereby teachers situated students being too sexually 'knowing' as justification for a health promotion approach to sex education. This construction primarily rests on the conflation of sexual knowledge and risk (Abbott, Ellis and Abbott, 2016). However, as demonstrated in section 7.5a (p. 254), young people themselves understand information as key component of feeling safe and prepared when navigating sex and relationships.

T2's experience of pupil engagement in RSE lessons appeared heavily affected by the presence of what she understood to be disruptive or inappropriate behaviours in the classroom:

> T2: *'it [anonymous question box] prevents over the top behaviours.'*
> 'they do try and go off the, you know, how babies are made into, you know, to ask other questions and stuff'
> *'if it's the whole class erupting in giggles, we have a bit of a giggle, we calm ourselves down, and then when we start'*
> *'you will get the obvious, always from the boys, 'Are we doing practicals?'*

T2 reflects a view of RSE as a catalyst for inappropriate pupil behaviours, depicting a need to manage and navigate 'over the top' responses to discussions of sex. The first two quotes

demonstrate a construction of pupil questions as a potential threat to her behavioural expectations for the lesson. Staff discomfort with pupil questions in sex education is a well identified issue, and potentially indicative of a lack of subject knowledge, practitioner confidence or personal discomfort with the subject matter (Francis, 2016). Unexpected or uncomfortable student questions are found to a principle site of 'triggering' moments for educators within sex education, and can evoke rapid, uncontrollable and sometimes inappropriate emotional responses (Francis, 2016).In turn, whilst T2 identified the question box as a tool to support pupil comfort, it is also possible that this strategy mitigates the potential for 'triggering' moments for her within lessons by offering time to produce a considered response. T2's response to 'over the top' pupil responses may also be fuelled by a desire, shared by many teachers, to maintain 'law and order' in the sex education classroom by 'keeping talk appropriate' (Dobson et al, 2017). As Allen (2014) argues, humour within sex education is highly problematised by risk-adverse schooling environments due to fears around safeguarding or reputational damage if a joke by students or staff is misconstrued. This is substantiated by Dobson et al's (2017) argument that sharing in moments of humour may threaten teachers' sense of professionalism and make them appear more vulnerable. Despite humour acting as a coping strategy, for adults and young people like, when navigating shame and discomfort associated with sex (see section 7.2e, p. 228), the 'safer' option for teachers becomes shutting down moments of comedy that do emerge (Allen, 2014).

T2 presented some notable moments of tension in her relationship to pupils, namely surrounding differences in expectations surrounding subject matter and personal boundaries in RSE.

T2*: 'some of them were like 'I can't be in that lesson because it's triggering', like, but if we don't talk about these things then how [pause] how are we ever going to?'*

'we have had, in year 12 especially, is a lot of them moaning and asking for trigger warnings. So everything triggering them at the moment. So you can't talk about anything without them being triggered.'

T2 demonstrates considerable resistance to pupils' attempts to assert boundaries in the RSE classroom, constructing their requests to leave possibly distressing lessons as a threat to the potential of creating social change through RSE. Whilst she demonstrated some responsivity to pupil voice by ultimately providing an opt-out option for students who felt affected by certain topics, her presentation of this incident constructs her and the students as opposing forces, with competing ideological aims. Ultimately, within her lived experience of RSE delivery, she understands pupils as wanting to withdraw and disengage from difficult conversations. Yet, as highlighted within the present study (section 7.5a (i), p. 254), and the work of Adams Tucker et al (2016), and Setty (2023a), young people strongly report a desire to engage with areas of complexity and nuance within RSE. Her emphasis on the term 'triggered' echoes right-wing political discourse that constructs 'woke' young people asserting boundaries around social justice issues and mental health as overly sensitive 'snowflakes' (Smith et al, 2023). This is also true of her claim 'you can't talk about anything.', which mirrors rhetoric surrounding 'cancel culture' (Smith et al, 2023. Interestingly, these points of tension could also be argued to represent her navigation of the need to balance pupil comfort with what Francis (2016) deems the 'learning edge' – the point of stepping outside our comfort zone where we acquire new information. This is exemplified by her emphasis on the need for pupils to challenge themselves:

T2 *'So again, the ground rules, and then you know, we're exploring different topics, we want you to feel comfortable, but we also want you to challenge yourself'*

Despite tension in negotiating boundaries within the learning process, both T2 and T1 describe strategies to facilitate pupil engagement whilst maintaining their comfort, centrally including the opportunity to leave distressing lessons (School B), and the provision of anonymous question boxes (School A and B):

T2: *'we have given them a choice to step outside, erm, and then also people that they can speak to if they need to'*
'So…the students who don't feel comfortable asking questions about that do have genuine answers.'
T1: *'giving them opportunities as well, even if they want to do it anonymously'*

Whilst T2 reflects a sense of struggle in balancing learning edges with pupil comfort, responsivity to pupils' voices and needs is evidently present in her relationship to student engagement. This is reflected in her eventual decision to allow students to leave distressing lessons. For Teachers One and Three, student voice is situated as a prominent catalyst for change within their RSE practice, particularly in the context of violence against women and girls, and LGBTQ+ inclusivity:

T1: *'it had very much come to our attention that there was a misogynistic culture here'*

'It all really blew up, I would say, with the Sarah Everard thing here, and in the sixth form, it just exploded… And that's when we realised as group, as a collective staff that it had to be done.'

'Lots of the students want us to do a bit more on expression, gender'

T3: *'They say it's [Ten:Ten resource] inclusive, because they don't necessarily say 'Oh, this is about a man or a woman' or not but it's very obvious that it is about men and women, and that's a way that they can get around it. But for our students, that's not enough. I think they demand more from us, which I think is really good'*

Each of these moments are depicted as key turning points in the Teachers' approaches to the subject, and furthermore, demonstrate pupils' investment in their own learning. Most strikingly, both Teachers One and Three meaningfully took on board student perspectives and needs, an approach that has not been reflected by policy makers in relation to RSE consultation, despite evidence of its benefit, as argued in section 3.2f (p. 65) (Setty and Dobson, 2023; Lundy, 2007).

T3 also depicts a positive relationship to parents within the school community, situating this as a further catalyst for positive change in their approach to RSE:

T3: They [parents] were generally positive about it, we had some feedback, saying they wanted more LGBTQ+ involvement in there as well…so we listened to that, and we take that on board'

Parent and carer engagement is identified as key determinant of impact for whole-school approaches to sex education (Ollis and Harrison, 2016). T3 models best practice by engaging with parental feedback on RSE. His reflection of parents as responding positively to RSE and pushing for *more* LGBTQ+ inclusivity in RSE represents a significant departure from wider discourse surrounding the relationship between parents and sex education in faith contexts. As explored in section 3.3b (p. 71), parents and the assertion of parental rights have been at the forefront of 'backlash' to LGBTQ+ inclusive RSE from conservative faith groups globally (Wareham, 2022; Bialystok and Wright, 2017). Fear of potential backlash from religious parents is found to intensify professional anxiety and willingness to engage in certain topics for some sex educators (Ollis and Harrison, 2016; Crabbe and Flood, 2021). Whilst parental resistance may largely be framed as a significant barrier to RSE provision, Herman-Wilmarth and Ryan (2019, p. 94) argue that such moments may in fact create space for dialogue and present opportunities for positive engagement with parents from faith communities. Whilst the specific faith identities of the parents T3 engaged with are unknown, his experience highlights that parental resistance to LGBTQ+ inclusion is not necessarily a universal position within faith school communities. This substantiates Phillips et al's (2023, p. 4) argument that the monolithic construction of religious parents as 'illiberal minorities' who reject progressive values is, in practice, often unfounded. In turn, this finding gives significant weight to Wareham's (2024) argument that a move to pluralist and inclusive RSE need not be construed as an infringement of religious parents' rights. In turn, it also challenges conservative RSE policy rhetoric, as emblemised by the Cates dossier (NSCU, 2023) that situates presumed parental resistance as the rationale for restricting and curtailing inclusive content within RSE.

5.4 Conflicted Relationship to Catholicism

All three participants, to varying degrees, constructed Catholicism as a useful moral framework through which RSE could be delivered.

T1: *'but it's actually easier because there's so much in the Bible and stuff like that about respect and the way we treat each other'*

'the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit all have a deeply loving relationship. And that's where we start is relationships'

T2: *'with having the focus being on the gospel values on living life to the full. That, I like that message'*

'it's really based around [pause], you know, the value of loving one another, the way that we go with it and to put our own stamp on it.'

T3: *'the PSHE curriculum fits really nicely in with our Catholic ethos, and I think, maybe more so as a [type of school] as well'*

'the intrinsic value of every human should be at the core of everything that we do.'

Teachers 1 and 3 expressed strongly that the distinct Catholic character of their schools had in fact *reduced* friction in implementing statutory RSE guidance, as the focus on relationships felt highly compatible with their overarching religious ethos and values. For T2, the inclusion of gospel values was identified as the main positive feature of the Ten:Ten Catholic RSE resources used by the school.

In parallel to this, all three participants presented a strong desire to distance themselves from conservative iterations of Catholic sexual ethics, particularly surrounding the Church stance on LGBTQ+ relationships and contraception. At times, this distancing appeared to stand in tension with the participants initial construction of Catholicism and statutory SRE content as compatible. This finding reflects growing dissent between young, socially liberal Catholics, and the teachings of the Catholic Church in relation to LGBTQ+ inclusion (Hornsby-Smith, 1991; Fulton, 2000). Notably, contemporary work in this area is limited, but work by Maher et al (2007) suggests that the many younger Catholics in the US do not align themselves with the sexual teachings of the Church. For all three, a sense of perceived ideological tension between Catholicism and RSE was palpable. T1 expressed considerable

personal conflict and anxiety surrounding the schools' delivery of content on LGBTQ+ relationships and contraception, and a sense that student needs were not being met due to ideological incompatibility.

> T1: *'obviously, you can't, you know, have a gay marriage in the Catholic Church. And so that can be a difficult line'*
> *'my only worry is good stuff like contraception. But yeah, we do still signpost?'*
> *'I think people see it and they think, God, you can't teach sex education in a Catholic school'*
> *'but also, being very aware that it still happens outside of marriage, and that's why we need to behave safely.'*
> *'I recognise today it's a, you know, and for some people as well [pause], it's 'actually, I'm gonna step back on that'.'*

Whilst T1 initially constructed Catholicism as a valuable framework for RSE, with reference to the Holy Trinity as a healthy relationship model, her account was also deeply marred by a construction of Catholic sexual ideals as unrealistic in a modern world, and thus unattainable to her students. She further reflected concern that (secular) schools are able to more effectively support students around contraception, and that the Catholic framework she operated within prevented this. T1 felt that pupils broadly accepted Catholic perspectives taught within RSE but noted resistance to the idea of 'waiting until marriage' and perceptible moral anxiety from students that non-adherence to Catholic values would exclude them from the faith.

For T2, her relationship to Catholicism was predominantly shaped by struggle with identity as both a Catholic woman and a divorcee.

T2: 'I've been to, like mass sometimes and they do the parable of the adulterous, the story of the adulterous woman and stuff, and I've been really uncomfortable'

'You could look at them and think, 'Well, I'm Catholic, and I disagree with that., and then does that make me a bad Catholic?... you start like questioning your religion….your beliefs'

For her, the experience of delivering Catholic relationships education evoked internal questioning of her own belonging in the faith and her relationship to religion itself. Through reflection on the use of Ten:Ten resources, which present Catholic marriage as the only morally permissible relationship structure and admonish divorce, T2 confronted her own alienation within. This clearly articulates the integral tension between the private and personal, and cultural and political RSE facilitators are forced to confront (Lodge et al, 2022).This was coupled with a lingering sense of moral anxiety surrounding the implications of teaching stringent Catholic sexual ethics to young people:

T2: 'what message is that giving our students…does that mean we're telling them they've committed a sin [if they've masturbated]'

Considering the work of feminist psychotherapy in relation to ongoing religious guilt and sexuality (Ogden, 2008; Mahoney, 2008), it is very possible that stringent messages against sexual experimentation and/or pleasure may have long lasting effects on some pupils' sexual wellbeing, which may validate T2's concerns. T2 appeared to negotiate the emerging tensions between her lived experience of as a Catholic woman, and her role in delivering Catholic RSE by emphasizing the possibility of a more liberal, flexible Catholic identity within her teaching:

T2: 'Not all of us, in Catholicism, you know, are strict with sex before marriage'

'I try to get through to the students…the Catholic church teaches this, however, yeah we are all free'

This represents further efforts to distance herself – and the school- from 'traditional' conservative Catholicism, whilst forging a more compassionate and adaptable Catholic identity. At the same time, Catholicism was clearly an important driving force in T2's life and career – given that she chose to move into Catholic schooling shortly after qualifying. Furthermore, she appeared to construct secular RSE practices as 'other', summarising her experience of secular RSE delivery during teacher training as:

T2: 'I did the condom demonstration and things like that'

In reducing secular RSE practice to a physical demonstration (one which may be considered crude), T2 constructs it as something distinct from, and perhaps less philosophically substantive than, the Catholic approach. It is notable that whilst the CES (2019) and Ten:Ten (Bailey and Willmott, 2022) materials encourage discussion of 'artificial' methods of contraception, condoms are not directly mentioned, and the topic is largely framed in contrast to the Church teachings on 'natural' family planning. As such, the condom demonstration may well represent a significant challenge to Catholic RSE approaches.

Interestingly, a similar construction of Catholic education as something distinct was also portrayed by T3, whereby the school itself represents a site of religious experience for both staff and students:

T3: 'it's the distinct, distinctive nature of the Catholic ethos of the school, which is so important.'

'everybody's having experiences when they're here, of faith'

This perspective returns to the overarching aims of Catholic schooling as placing *'the teachings of the Catholic Church at the centre of the educational enterprise'* (Catholic Education Service, 2014, p.2). Despite this, T3 also reflected a similar will to distance the RSE delivery he oversaw, and thus himself, from conservative Catholic sexual values, particularly surrounding the requirements to include LGBTQ+ identities under the statutory guidance:

T3: 'Relationships and Sex Education, is for everybody, and not just for your heteronormative people.'

'For us, as a faith school, who are maybe more liberal as a school and more open as a school, we, we found that [including LGBTQ+ content] *quite easy to do, but there are other schools'*

'I don't think we did enough before…I don't think that's from a, I don't think that's because 'we're a Catholic school, so like, we don't want to talk about this because it's taboo'. I think we just, because we didn't have to, it was more time out that we didn't want to have to use.'

Notably, T3 appears to recognise a potential incompatibility between faith schooling and inclusive RSE delivery but is keen to construct School B as an exception to this rule. Interestingly, he emphasises time deprivation and the historic non-statutory position of SRE as the central limitations that previously hindered the delivery of LGBTQ+ inclusive content within the school. Throughout their interviews, all three participants clearly situated themselves as LGBTQ+ allies, and the teachers in school B were particularly keen to emphasise their efforts to enhance inclusivity of sexual and gender diversity. Despite this,

Callaghan (2016, p.284) questions the extent to which *any* Catholic schools can be a safe space for LGBTQ+ students due the 'panoptic power of Catholic doctrine'. Similarly, Bailey (2020) questions the legitimacy of anti-homophobic and transphobic bullying policies in Catholic primary schools. That is to say, how accepting can any institution be that has, within recent history, upheld a view of homosexuality as 'intrinsically disordered'? (Pope John Paul II, Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1992).

It is also worth noting that LGBTQ+ allyship within English schools has become increasingly challenging for teachers to uphold, given the mounting socio-political hostility and marginalisation faced by trans and gender non-conforming young people (Marshall, 2024). As discussed in section 3.2e (p. 62), this hostility has perforated the RSE policy sphere, emblemised by the NSCU (2023) report and the 2024 draft guidance (Department for Education, 2024b). Further, in December 2023 the DfE published draft guidance for schools on 'gender questioning children', that explicitly seeks to curtail LGBTQ+ young people's rights to self-define their pronouns and gender presentation within school (Department for Education, 2023b). The draft guidance would necessitate schools to contact parents, regardless of students' consent, if they 'socially transition' at school (i.e. request different pronouns or names to be used), and highlights that young people must use toilets and changing facilities 'designated for their biological sex' as default (Department for Education, 2023b, p. 14). Notably, these proposals have been widely criticised by teaching unions (NASWUT, 2023) and LGBTQ+ charities alike (Mermaids, 2024) due to potential infringement of the Equality Act 2010, and safeguarding responsibilities for LGBTQ+ young people who are not 'out' to their families. The guidance remains in a consultation phase, and it is currently unclear whether or how the new Labour government will enact it.

All three teachers demonstrate significant dissent from the institutional sexual ethics of the Catholic Church, highlighting concerns around the admonishment of LGBTQ+ identities, pre-marital sex, and contraception – and the potential impact of these teachings on young people. This reflects an increasing degree of separation between the sexual values of lay Catholics in Western countries and the doctrine of the Church itself (Whittle and Henry, 2024; Hornsby-Smith, 1991; Fulton, 2000). Research conducted by the Pew Research Centre (Diamant, 2020) highlights that the 78% of Catholics in the UK and Europe believe gay

people should be able to marry, and 86% felt there should be more societal acceptance for LGBTQ+ identities. Notably, heterogenous views towards LGBTQ+ identities within Catholicism can, in part, be explained by the variety of theological stances within the faith. Kirby and Michaelson (2008) highlight that increased tolerance towards sexual diversity is largely associated with the 'reformist' position, usually adopted by younger, more politically liberal Catholics – as opposed to the 'restorationist' position, which follows pre-Vatican II teachings. Whilst the religious identity of T1 remains unknown, Teachers Two and Three can be seen to appeal to this more liberal formation of Catholicism. Whilst the Vatican may have produced a veneer of inclusivity in recent years (see section 3.3d (ii), p. 78), the lack of substantive theological change in this area places liberal Catholic educators, like the participants in this study, in a somewhat difficult position.

Whittle and Henry (2024, p.2) argue that many contemporary Catholic schools navigate the ideological tension between Vatican teachings and LGBTQ+ inclusion by adopting a pastoral framework and avoiding 'thorny' areas of doctrine where possible. As highlighted by T1, teaching the Catholic admonition of same-sex marriage remains a 'difficult line' in schools that also attempt to uphold inclusive learning environments. Strikingly, Teachers Two and Three did not acknowledge institutional homophobia within Catholicism – outside of the lack of inclusion within the Ten:Ten resources (see section 5.3, p. 152). It appears neither necessarily perceived Catholicism as antithetical to LGBTQ+ inclusive education. This is further highlighted by T3's insistence that time deprivation over faith was the central hinderance to their performance in this area. This reflects wider efforts to construct the Magisterium condemnation of homosexuality as 'somehow not relevant in *this* Catholic school' (Whittle and Henry, 2024, p.1). In turn, a certain degree of cognitive dissonance appears necessary to reconcile both the distinct Catholic character of their school, and its capacity for LGBTQ+ inclusion within RSE.

5.5 Relationship to Role

The lived experience of RSE delivery for all participants hinged on their relationship to their role within the school, a pivotal factor that can be seen across all of the themes explored in this chapter. Across all three participants, this relationship was, at times, strained by

external and structural factors. Teachers 1 and 3 associated a considerable degree of stress and anxiety with their roles, owing to the increased pressure associated with acting as subject leaders and implementing new statutory guidance:

> T1: *' if I've got space on my timetable, I have it'*
> *'it's essentially at the moment, anyone who has space, okay, which is hard'*
> *'I'm finding it really difficult personally. Like, because it's been put on the back burner for so long'*
> T3: *'feels like a, you're almost like a ticking a box, it feels like 'okay you've got 25 minutes in form time'*
> *'I think, I hope that they spoke well about what they'd had.'*

Both participants highlight issues of time-deprivation, trying to accommodate RSE provision with limited timetable and staffing space. As T3 highlights, such conditions risk the integrity of their RSE provision, reducing lessons to a box-ticking exercise. Similarly, a majority of teachers in Cumper et al's (2023) study, conducted in the run-up to statutory RSE, identified time constraints as one of the most significant barriers to delivery. T1, notably interviewed much earlier in 2021, reflects on increased professional pressure associated with implementing the statutory RSE guidance, particularly considering the historic neglect of the subject. As she describes, schools rapidly had to shift resourcing and focus to ensure they met statutory standards on a subject that had, for the previous two decades, garnered minimal policy and practice attention. For schools whose RSE provision may have been underdeveloped, this meant a heavy increase in workload for subject leaders in the run up to statutory roll out. The final quotation from T3 describes his anxiety surrounding a recent Ofsted inspection, in which students were asked about sexual harassment prevention measures in the school, including RSE. Following the death of Ruth Perry in 2023, a headteacher who killed herself whilst awaiting the outcome of an Ofsted inspection, the burden of 'relentless and crushing' pressure placed on teachers during inspections has become an increasingly well-identified issue within English schooling (Henshaw, 2024). It is

therefore important recognise the gravity of the inspection described by T3, particularly as a subject leader and Head of Department.

Converse to this, T2 reflected a distancing from responsibility within RSE delivery, shaped by her position as a less senior member of staff in School B's RE department, led by T3:

> T2: *'he is, like, the Head of Ethos. I'm just quite new to some it'*
> *'I'm not sure what [Dept. Head Name] would've looked at [for RSE resources]'*

This is not the say that the role did not hold personal cost to T2, but rather the pressures and weight of RSE delivery manifested differently to the other participants, who held increased responsibility in subject design and oversight. In part, this theme may be attributed to her having only started at the school two years prior, in the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. As such, when presented with questions around broader decisions in School B's RSE provision, she defers to T3 as the arbiter of subject and school specific knowledge. Beyond this, T2 appeared confident in her role as an RSE practitioner, attributing this to having elected to focus on RSE during her teacher training, and having received specific training on using the Ten:Ten resources as a department:

> T2: *'cuz you've had that training, you have that background, but for some it can be quite anxiety inducing.'*
> *'when I came here, I did the Ten:Ten training and things.'*
> *'I sort of, like, took over that [PSHE delivery]. It was part of my NQT project'*
> *'we're confident delivering all of that, but obviously, we're not doing everything. Because we're all trained, we've done all the training.'*

As a result of training, T2 was able to distance herself from feelings of anxiety that others in the profession may associate with RSE delivery. In turn, she appeared assured in ability as a practitioner, and reflected a strong sense of confidence in her department as a team. The construction of training as a catalyst for professional confidence is also reflected by T3:

> T3: ‘‘*all of the RE department have had training from the CES, the Catholic Education Service on how to deliver good RSE in a Catholic school…so I know that they will be trained well’*

Notably, both teachers highlight the value of specific, tailored training for Catholic RSE delivery, both from Ten:Ten and the CES. In both teachers’ experiences, having received this training sets them apart from other teachers in the school, thus situating the RE department as best placed to deliver RSE. Training is identified as a key ‘structure for care’ for teachers delivering GBV prevention programmes, in that it supports confident engagement with potentially challenging topics and offers space for reflection and collegial support (Dadvand and Cahill, 2021). Building on this, training appears to be a confounding factor in the subject confidence expressed by Teachers Two and Three, which is notably not as visible within T1’s experiences.

Building on this, Teachers Two and Three construct the move to statutory RSE as a transformative moment in the school’s approach to RSE:

> T2: *‘I think it was mainly delivered through form time. Erm [pause] before it was like made, made into policy.’*
> T3: ‘ *when [pause] it wasn't statutory, I don't, I don't think we did enough’*
> *‘It was just at the time of all the reforms, and it was humongous’*
> *‘now it's compulsory that, everyone does it , it will make a huge difference’*

For Teacher 3 in particular, statutory RSE is positioned as a catalyst for significant change, both in terms of bettering the school approach, but also as he took on his role as Head of Ethos, and thus PSHE, at that time. For him, the policy reform represents as a key moment in his professional identity and appears closely tied to his will to improve RSE provision within the school. In turn, T3 reflects a hopeful outlook that statutory RSE will offer the same transformation for other schools, and offer more consistency across the sector. This also echoes findings from Cumper et al (2023), in which teachers identified statutory policy as an opportunity for RSE to be taken more seriously across the sector, acting as a catalyst for enhance clarity and consistency in provision.

Both T1 and Two emphasised the importance of maintaining personal boundaries in the RSE classroom. They both conveyed a sense that boundaries were likely to be pushed in the classroom by inappropriate behaviour, comments, and personal questions:

> T2: '*so you know, never ask me a personal question-'*
> *'make it really clear to Students, these things we're talking about, these are things we're not talking about'*
> *''we do try and you know, start off of the, let's get the silliness out of the way now and then, right, these are the biological terms we're gonna use'*
> T1*: 'it's never shutting down conversations…but challenging conversations that aren't appropriate'*

In doing so, both teachers highlight a perception of certain questions, conversations and language is constituted as a threat to the learning process. This perception returns to the prevalent teachers' prevalent desire to 'keep talk appropriate' and maintain discipline within the sex education classroom, as explored in section 5.3 (p. 149) (Dobson et al, 2017; Allen, 2014). T2's construction of personal questions as out of bounds also returns to Francis' (2016) argument that unexpected student questions can trigger uncomfortable and

uncontrollable emotional responses for teachers, and result in a shut-down of dialogue. Teachers in Francis' (2016) study reflected feeling that some student questions were deliberately attempting to embarrass or undermine them, or at times felt their sexual identity was being questioned by pupils. A teacher in Allen's (2014) study reported being 'gobsmacked' by student questions about his own sexual experiences in the classroom, perceiving it as an attempt to undermine his authority. Allen (2014) argues that such questions are also shaped by normative gendered narratives, with students testing the teacher's masculine status. It is notable that this sub-theme emerged for the two women teachers, suggesting further interplay with gendered experiences. Women teachers in Lahelma et al's (2000) study of sexual harassment enacted by pupils reported feeling 'on display' in the classroom and being hyperaware of the possibility for students to sexualise their appearance, speech and movements. Further, work by teaching unions in England has highlighted that women teachers are prolifically subjected to sexual harassment and misogyny from students (Weale, 2022). As such, it is possible that the 'threat' posed by personal questions from students for T2 and T1 is compounded by broader systems of sexual harassment faced by female educators.

5.6 Team Identity and Relationships

A strong point of contention emerged between the two schools surrounding staff team identity. T1 (School A) situated herself as having undertaken sole responsibility for overhauling RSE delivery at the school. In turn, she reported a significant amount of strain from supporting other staff in effectively delivering the content she designed. Coupled with this was a notable lack of confidence other staff's ability to deliver RSE, perceiving them as struggling with concepts surrounding sexual and gender identity, correct terminology and safeguarding processes.

T1: *'what I find is, staff grab me, they're like, I'm having a problem, this is going on. And I'm like, I'm not aware. Like, yeah, I need that in an email…that's what I find difficult cuz I've got about 23 staff at the moment'.*

'the consistency in terms of delivery... is difficult and what you feel comfortable, like, I'm very comfortable'

'that's fine when it's brought to me and then then I can go on, I'm happy to address it. But it has, it's got to be whole-school'

'I picked up here what was citizenship then.. Just like one period a week, but that was very much like alcohol and drugs…I then changed the curriculum'

In sharp contrast, T2 and T3 saw themselves as part of a strong and dependable team with the RE department. Both expressed a unified departmental identity, perceiving their colleagues to be distinctly 'on their team' when it came to RSE provision. T2 expressed feeling highly supported and held by her colleagues, trusting that they could always lean on each other when challenges in implementation arose. This is similarly reflected in T3's account:

T2: *'as a team were good, we're strong. We'll see about the curriculum.'*

'with like the questions we get in the question box, [colleague name] had one and she

like 'what's No Nut November?' [Laughs]…we usually do help one another, yeah. We're all such a close department'

T3: *'we could unpack that a little bit more because it was the RE department coming together'*

'we're trying as a diocese'

Notably, the use of subject pronouns in all of the participants interviews offers insight into their relationship to other staff in relation to RSE practice in their school. Teachers Two and Three consistently refer to the department as a collective, using 'we' and 'our' in when discussing their approach and key decisions. T3 extends this collective identity to a diocese level, again using 'we' to signify a united entity and approach. Conversely, T1 creates a separation between herself and other staff, as exemplified by her use of 'I' versus 'them': '*what I find is, staff grab me, they're like…'* This is potentially indicative of a sense of disconnect from her colleagues, and a feeling of being unsupported by others. Further, the language of being 'grabbed' reflects a visceral sense of strain and being pulled in unwanted directions. In turn, this reinforces a sense that she alone is responsible for RSE provision across the school. The difference in team identity, of the absence thereof, between the school reflects stronger presence of 'structures for care' in School B (Dadvand and Cahill, 2021). Structures for care describes the policies, relationships and conditions that enable teachers to feel held and supported within a school; including training provision, behaviour modelled by colleagues, leadership commitment, and timetabling provision (Dadvand and Cahill, 2021). Dadvand and Cahill (2021) found that these factors were determinant forces in teachers feeling confident in navigating a relationships education programme in Victoria, Australia. Such support appears absent from T1's experience at School A, which may compound her feelings of resentment and mistrust of other staff. As she highlights, effective sex education must be whole-school, and within her lived experience, the onus of responsibility and accountability for the subject appears to rest on her.

Both T2 and T3 shared an view of the RE department as proxy subject specialists. In part, both teachers attribute this to the department being specifically trained in RSE provision:

T2: *'we're all really good at doing like CPD. Yeah. And do a lot of our own research and things'*

T3*: ''I've made a decision to do it through the RE department…The reason why I did that is partly because I'm a control freak…I wanted was for it to be delivered by a team of staff that I knew had got training'*

For both teachers, the 'structures for care' within their departmental team act as a proxy for quality assurance for the preparation and delivery of RSE content, including the availability of CPD and training (Dadvand and Cahill, 2021). T3's desire for control and oversight of the subject is also reflected in T2's rhetoric of mistrust surrounding non-RE staff's ability to deliver RSE content in form times.

T2: 'I think we probably are the best ones to deliver'

'all of us in the RE department are Catholic'

'I think some form tutors do struggle, with some of that stuff. You know, the Pride resources as well'

Interestingly, this echoes T1's mistrust in other staff member's ability to effectively deliver RSE. It is also notable that T2 cites the religious identity of the department as further insurance of consistency and quality of RSE delivery. As highlighted in section 3.3c (p. 75), some Catholic schools mandate that RE should only be delivered by practising Catholics, and many require RE teachers to have undertaken the Catholic Certificate in Religious Studies (Board of Religious Studies, n.d, accessed 05/24), which arguably aims to create a more consistent teaching staff on Catholic perspectives. It is also notable that the T2 and T3 construct the most explicitly Catholic outpost of Catholic schools, RE, as the best suited for RSE delivery. This reflects a perceived computability between Catholicism and RSE delivery,

which interestingly is not consistently reflected in their relationship to Catholic sexual ethics (see 5.4, p. 141 onwards).

5.7 Barriers to Delivery

All three teachers expressed a sense that their ability to effectively deliver RSE was, at times, inhibited by external factors. T1 reflected a feeling of unpreparedness when addressing gender and sexuality, relating to a feeling of being out of touch with current identity politics and sexual cultures.

> T1: *'like I do training and stuff, but I still don't know enough to do that [pause] to do a good job of that, to be honest.'*
> *'I always want to make sure I'm, I do my research. But actually, sometimes, that research isn't the most up to date'*
> *'Apparently, there's a tik tok trend at the moment that's drawing naked women. Had no clue'*
> *'we've got lots of students expressing themselves in different ways, but they face, they do face a lot of stigma in school.'*

T1 highlights that training and research have not adequately prepared her to navigate what she perceives as a rapidly changing sexual and cultural landscape. As explored in Chapter Seven, student perspectives on the coverage of LGBTQ+ identities in School A varied. Whilst some felt the school (and thus, T1) were proactively covering pronouns and gender identities (7.2f, p. 205), others felt there was significant room for improvement (7.2d, p. 198). Notably, even where the young women were critical of gaps in inclusivity with RSE, they too recognised that teachers had grown up in drastically different sexual cultures (7.2d, p. 198). Furthermore, it is pertinent to recognise the lack of support for teachers in providing LGBTQ+ inclusive RSE at a policy level. The statutory RSE guidance (Department for Education, 2019, p. 15) provides minimal instruction as to how schools should approach LGBTQ+ inclusivity, beyond advising

compliance with the Equality Act 2010 and ensuring content is 'sensitive and age appropriate'. As explored in section 3.2e (p. 62), recent Conservative policy discourse has attempted to further restrict LGBTQ+ inclusivity within RSE content (Department for Education, 2024b), which if actioned, could leave teachers even less prepared to adequately cover these topics. Further, the Catholic Education Service (2019) model RSE curriculum only covers LGBTQ+ identities in the context of Equalities legislation and legal rights to same-sex marriage. Overall, T1's gaps in knowledge surrounding LGBTQ+ identities were intensified by a lack of adequate teaching guidance and resourcing. Alongside this, T1 recognised that LGBTQ+ students still experience discrimination within the school environment, indicating a significant need for improvement in inclusion within the school. T2 similarly reported a feeling that there were gaps surrounding inclusivity of LGBTQ+ identities in her practice:

> T2: *'but it is all stuff that we could be doing better, so we're having a look… some of it is making it more inclusive'*

Teacher anxiety surrounding content on LGBTQ+ identities was also found by Cumper et al (2023). Teachers expressed concern surrounding use of the correct and up to date terminology, fear around appropriate responses to student disclosures of LGBTQ+ identity, and fear of parental backlash (Cumper et al, 2023). T1's experience in particular constructs contemporary sexual politics as continuously evolving, and difficult to grasp and understand.

T2 and T3 displayed awareness of the increasingly hostile socio-political climate surrounding RSE delivery – particularly the statutory requirement to include teaching on LGBTQ+ identities - and how this shapes their role as educators.

T3: *'primary schools who said 'we don't feel like we can do this at the minute because of the people we've got in our community'*

T2: *'it's difficult because then you've still got, you have a protests, like in the Midlands, for teaching different genders and stuff'*

'the Education Minister, who's now trying to make it part of safeguarding policy that if a student comes out to a member of staff we've got to ring home…does that mean that I go, if they come out as straight to me, I go ring home. 'Do you know your child is straight?' [laughs]'

Both T2 and T3 alludes to tensions between conservative religious communities and LGBTQ+ inclusive RSE (section 3.3b, p. 70). T3 reflects that such community resistance is a central barrier to School B's feeder primary schools' RSE provision. Whilst the religious identity of the communities in question is unclear, press coverage has largely focused on protests within Muslim communities in Birmingham against the 'No Outsiders' LGBTQ+ inclusion programme for primary schools (Parveen, 2019), which T2 appears to reference. For both teachers, 'backlash' from conservative religious communities is constructed as a prominent aspect of the context surrounding RSE delivery. For T2, such backlash appears to represent a looming threat which may frustrate her delivery of LGBTQ+ content, reflecting the anxieties of teachers within Ollis and Harrison (2016) and Crabbe and Flood (2021). Notably, T3 constructs this concern as afflicting other schools, but not School B. This may reflect his positive and dialogic approach to parental and community engagement, as explored in section 5.3 (p. 152).

In the latter quote, T2 highlights the increasing problematisation of LGBTQ+ identities in the context of UK schooling, which has intensified since fieldwork took place. This discursive shift comes as result of increasing scaremongering from the political right and conservative religious groups surrounding sexualisation and 'indoctrination' within RSE (Cumper et al, 2023; Marshall, 2024). As discussed in section 3.2e (p. 62), trans and gender non-conforming young people increasingly problematised, as seen within Miriam Cate's dossier (NSCU, 2023) and the politicisation of the subsequent RSE review, and draft guidance (Department for

Education, 2024b). The proposed need for schools to disclose pupils' identities to parents, as rejected by T2, features as a key aspect of the Department for Education's (2023b) draft guidance on 'gender questioning children'. As argued in section 3.2e (p. 64), significant concerns about the safeguarding and equalities implications of this proposed requirement have been raised by third-sector organisations, thus substantiating T2's frustrations with the political treatment of LGBTQ+ young people in English schools (NASWUT, 2023; Mermaids, 2024).

Whilst she felt RSE was critical in challenging cultures of sexual violence, T1 described a sense of feeling constrained imbedded cultures of misogyny within the school and in children's home lives.

> T1: *'when you're hearing it at home, it's hard for us then in school to break that down'*
> *'it is a bit of a cultural thing with a lot of the intake of students…I don't want to say that laddy, but like, yeah, it wasn't, It wasn't okay.'*

T1 recognises the ecology of forces at play in students' understandings of gender and sexuality. As she highlights, RSE represents only one facet , and misogyny may be proliferated in students home lives and wider society. Notably, she also alludes to a increasing sense that schools alone hold responsibility for changing harmful sexual cultures amongst young people. This issue has also been raised by teaching unions, who have argued that schools require increased resources and support from other agencies in order to adequately support young people in this area (NASWUT, 2024; BBC News, 2021). Whilst T1 highlights a very real issue in placing sole onus of cultural change on schools and teachers, she also reflects a construction of families and local communities as poor role models in the context of sexual values. This is also reflected in Abbott, Ellis and Abbott's (2016) study of SRE teachers; however, their findings situate this rhetoric as a justification of comprehensive SRE, rather than a hindrance for practice. Furthermore, they found that

teachers more often used this justification in the context of racially minoritized and working-class parents, constructing these communities as lacking ambition and family values, thus enabling teen pregnancies, or as pushing children into force marriages (Abott, Ellis and Abbott, 2016).

Despite constructing statutory RSE as a key catalyst for change within School B's provision, T3 also reflected that the ambiguous nature of the guidance left space for insufficient RSE delivery in other schools:

> *T3: 'if it was more of a statutory, you must teach about this, then I think they would find that a lot easier…it makes it easier for people to shirk their responsibilities'*

As argued in section 3.2b (p. 54), the requirements of faith schools in relation to sex education within English policy has long been defined by ambiguity and vagueness (Monk, 2001). Arguably, the 2019 guidance offers no more insight into how faith should be reflected within the RSE classroom than its predecessor (Department for Education and Employment, 2000). As Monk (2001) highlights, the SRE guidance's stipulation that faith schools *may choose* to include religious perspectives in sex education, with no instruction as to how this ought to be done, left space for significant inconsistency in provision across English schools. T3's reflections on the lack of specificity on required content within the statutory guidance appears to demonstrate that Monk's (2001) critique remains just as pertinent today. T3's narrative also appears to collude with his construction of School B as the exception to the rule in terms of adopting inclusive statutory RSE in faith contexts (section 5.4, p. 158), by distancing his practice from other peoples 'shirking' of responsibility.

Furthermore, he felt that the school was forced to pick up the pieces left by poor RSE provision in feeder primary schools - discussing the influx of pupils coming into secondary

school ill-equipped to navigate relationships, and with limited understanding of sexual and gender identity.

> *T3: 'what I've said to those primary schools is actually, you're set them up to fail… they come to us in year 7, not knowing half as much as they should'*

Schools, including Catholic schools, in England are increasingly governed by multi-academy trusts rather than local authorities. In the case of Catholic schools, governance is also provided by the local diocese (Holy Family Carton School, 2019). As such, ensuring consistent RSE provision across primary and secondary schools in one locality is an extremely difficult task. In turn, as highlighted by T3, young people are entering secondary school with highly disparate levels of knowledge and awareness. This reflection suggests a need for a whole-network (rather than simply whole-school) approach to RSE delivery, to ensure key learning can built upon throughout educational stages. However, this change would require substantive overhaul of the statutory RSE requirements, as T3 suggests, but also of the ways in which schools interact within local areas. There are, however, issues in overarching governance of RSE provision, as highlighted by T2 in relation to the Ten:Ten resources:

> *T2: 'potentially drop the videos, erm, [laughs] whether we do as a school, I don't know, because like I said, the diocese are quite keen on not being inconsistent.'*
> *'it's really difficult to do their cheesy one liners, to run that face to face'*
> *'But my biggest criticism from them, It is very one dimensional'*
> *'Some [resources] are a bit too Catholic, which is why we want to put our, own spin.'*

T2 highlights that decision making surrounding the Ten:Ten resources was enforced from a diocese level, with a goal to increase consistency across schools. In turn, T2 reflects a sense of having to work with resources that, to her, appear extremely restrictive, 'cheesy', and too overtly religious. Whilst she highlights an approach of adding her 'own spin' on the resources to provide more nuance and fill gaps, she overall appears to construct the Ten:Ten resources as a hinderance to her RSE practice. Notably, her rejection of the Catholic lens of the resources potentially relates to her personal tension with Catholic sexual ethics, explored in section 5.4 (p. 156). Overall, T2's experience positions lack of autonomy surrounding RSE design and delivery across schools as a key barrier to practice, which could be viewed as contradicting T3's desire for more prescriptive RSE guidance. As such, RSE policy requires a careful balance between clarity around necessary requirements, and maintenance of educator autonomy in design and delivery of content.

5.8 Conclusion

Chapter Five principally sought to address RQ 1 *How do Catholic sexual values intersect with statutory RSE requirements in Catholic schools?* This chapter offers the only empirical exploration of teachers' experiences of delivering RSE in English faith schools to date, and represents a particularly unique contribution to knowledge in this area. In reference to RQ 1, the teachers' experiences reflect a nuanced relationship between Catholic sexual values and RSE requirements, that is neither wholly antithetical nor complimentary – as exemplified by the master theme of 'Conflicted Relationship to Catholicism' (5.4, p. 139). Catholicism and gospel values were constructed as a useful framework upon which statutory RSE content could be built, and all three teachers expressed clear rejection of narratives that construct Catholicism and sex education as mutually exclusive. Despite this, T1 and T2 expressed significant concerns about the implications of RSE premised on conservative Catholic sexual ethics. For both, the admonition of contraception, LGBTQ+ identities and premarital sex within Catholicism were viewed as potential barriers to effective RSE provision.

Furthermore, the teachers' relationships to their role as RSE facilitators appears largely defined by factors outside of faith. As explored in section 5.2 (p. 141 onwards), all three teachers viewed RSE as a critically important tool for making a different in young people's lives and tackling social issues such as sexual harassment, period poverty, and the prolonged impact of Covid-19. All of the participants were driven by their own experiences and proximity to sexuality and relationships, demonstrating the inextricable role of personhood and values in the RSE teaching experience. Their relationships to pupils were prevalently shaped by moments of disengagement in RSE, which they attributed to the lasting impact of COVID-19 on learning styles, increased social media usage and the socio-cultural background of different student groups. At times, teacher-student relationships became fractious in the context of RSE, particularly where teacher boundaries were perceived to be transgressed. Despite this, all participants reflected student voice – and for T3, parent voice - as a powerful catalyst in transforming their school approaches to RSE.

The participants also reflected a number of institutional factors as barriers to effective RSE delivery, including time constriction, historic neglect of subject, pressure of implementing new guidance, anxiety associated with Ofsted inspections, experience in role, and training availability. Perceptions of their roles were also highly tied to the availability of collegial support and feeling part of a team, which was not present for T1. Finally, all participants reflected a significant socio-political hinderances to their practice, including feeling sexual cultures are evolving too rapidly, wider cultures of misogyny and homophobia outside of school, and one-dimensional resources.

All six themes explored in this chapter (see 5.1, p. 127), provide a substantive foundation upon which RQ 4 '*How do the experiences of staff delivering RSE in Catholic schools collude or contrast with young women's experiences?*' can be addressed. Across the following two chapters (Chapter Six and Chapter Seven), the teachers experiences will provide a point of contrast and, at times, collusion for the perspectives and experiences of the young women in relation to Catholic RSE delivery. Chapter Six, while predominantly focusing on the pupils' voices, will specifically explore areas of agreement and tension between the two groups in relation to sexual cultures and values, with a view to contextualising their relationship to RSE.

Chapter Six: Young women's lived experiences of 'fraught sexual landscapes'

6.1 Introduction

This chapter explores findings relating to young women's lived experiences of gender, sexuality, and relationships within their school lives and beyond. It offers an important contextual backdrop to their lived experiences and perceptions of statutory RSE in Catholic schools, which is substantively explored in the next chapter (Chapter Seven, p.189). This chapter is borne out of a prominent overarching theme of 'fraught sexual landscapes', which emerged across both pupil focus groups. The composite master themes within each of the groups relating to this overarching theme are displayed in the table below. The development of these master themes, in relation to transcript quotes and superordinate themes can be seen in blue shaded sections of appendices K and L.

Table 11: Pupil Master Themes Relating to Overarching Theme 1

Overarching Theme 1: Fraught Sexual Landscapes	
School A	**School B**
Normalisation of Sexual Harassment	*Social and sexual pressure*
Relationships as social event	*Resisting relationship pressure*
Feeling unsafe	*Rejecting idealisation of relationships*
Aligning self as ally	*Distancing from sexual behaviour and desire*
Gendered sexual expectations	*Discomfort discussing sex outside of school*
Fear of sexual consequence	*Fear of Sexual Consequence*
Sex negative moral framework	*Fear of being undesirable*
Empathy for male experiences	*Observing gender differences in relationships*
Fear of Judgement	*Empathy for Boy's Experiences*
Lack of understanding from male peers	*Normalisation of gender segregation at Primary.*
Gender segregation in primary	

This chapter explores young women's navigation of broader social structures and norms relating to gender, sexuality, and relationships. This is what Setty (2023a, p.4) describes as the 'ecosystems of youth socio-sexual life'. Within this 'ecosystem', the participants developed their own sexual ethics, values, and expectations, which in turn shape their understanding of and engagement with RSE, as explored in Chapter Seven.

Chapter Six will principally address RQ 3 '*Does RSE delivered in Catholic schools reflect and meet the current needs of young women in England*?' and RQ 4 '*How do the experiences of staff delivering RSE in Catholic schools collude or contrast with young women's experiences?*'. This will be achieved through the exploration of participants' perceptions of pertinent issues surrounding gender, sexuality, and relationships for their age group, therefore beginning to build a picture of the current needs of this group. These areas of experience will be contrasted against the teacher experiences outlined in Chapter Five, to identify points of collusion and contradiction. Further, as advocated by Smith et al (2009), this chapter will situate the findings within existing research and literature. The chapter is divided into several sections and sub-sections, comprised of master themes identified across the two pupil focus groups, and the constituent superordinate themes. Each sub-section comprises supporting quotes, followed by analytical discussion and links to existing literature. Throughout Chapters Six and Seven, colour coding is used for participant quotes to enhance clarity and enable mapping of individual voices. A key of this coding is offered in the table below:

Table 12: Key of Pupil Colour Coding

School A	**School B**
Mia	Ruby
Lily	Ada
Ella	Krista
Nadia	Nisha
Saffi	Chloe
Sasha	

6.2 Normalisation of Sexual Harassment and Feeling Unsafe

In School A, Sasha, Lily, Mia and Saffi highlighted how pervasive sexual harassment, particularly verbal harassment and the use of the word 'slut', had become an embedded and normalised aspect of their school experience:

Saffi: *'People call other people like sluts and that.'*

'I think it's just like an everyday kind of thing.'

'Sometimes girls say it.'

Lily: *'Because it's just like so normal that people's call us that. Everyone just says it'*

Sasha: *'they just call it that. And then you think it's a normal thing?'*

Mia: *'I've never had it said to me, but I can, You can like hear it around'*

Notably, Mia's quotation highlights sexist language as entrenched within the audio landscape of the school. The proliferation, and subsequent normalisation, of sexual harassment in UK schools is well-documented. Since its creation in 2020, 'Everyone's Invited' – an anonymous sharing platform for experiences of sexual violence in UK education settings – has had over 50,000 submissions (Everyone's Invited, 2023). The rapid rise of the platform prompted an Ofsted (2021) review of sexual harassment in schools, which found that sexual harassment was a 'commonplace' feature of the school environment. They found that the majority of young women had experienced sexist name-calling, and that 9 in 10 had experienced image-based sexual harassment (Ofsted, 2021). The Women and Equalities Committee (WEC) (2023) report highlighted misogyny, sexual harassment and violence towards female staff and students as an endemic problem within UK schools and higher education. Notably, the WEC (2023) report situates comprehensive RSE delivery, and specifically increased engagement of young men and boys within RSE, as one of the key methods through which cultures of sexual harassment in schools can be challenged.

The participants in School A highlighted use of the term 'slut' as the principal form of sexism and sexual harassment within their school. Interestingly, the participants themselves were hesitant to repeat the term during our conversation – instead alluding to the term as 'it' until I asked Saffi to expand on what she meant. For some participants, the verbal nature of this harassment lessened its severity and impact, yet, for Nadia this still constituted a 'serious' problem:

Saffi: *'I don't care'*

Sasha: *'it's just a word. It doesn't have any actual meaning anymore?'*

Nadia: *'They know how serious it is.'*

The meaning of the term 'slut' has shifted over recent years and has become a normalised and embedded means of insulting women (Dobson, 2019). This may, as Sasha emphasises, lessen the emotional impact of its usage for some. For Saffi and Sasha, sexist language and verbal sexual harassment is constructed as somewhat inconsequential. Saffi reflects almost a defensive indifference, whereas for Sasha, the verbal nature of the harassment diminishes its perceived impact. Conversely, Nadia reflects that she feels the perpetrators of this behaviour are aware of the serious nature of harassment, in turn, highlighting her own understanding of verbal harassment as something more substantively concerning.

The focus group at School A was conducted eight months after the murder of Sarah Everard, at a time of increased public and press attention surrounding violence against women and girls (VAWG), particularly in the context of street safety (Topping, 2022). In turn, some participants reflected a palpable sense of fear and unease surrounding their safety, particularly at night:

Lily: *'but as a as a woman going outside, it's low key a bit [pause]'*

Saffi: *'especially in the dark, with it getting dark earlier'*

Mia: *'I walked home like in the pitch black last night. It was really [unclear]'*

Data produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) demonstrates that one in two women across England, Scotland and Wales felt unsafe walking home alone at night, compared to one in seven men (ONS, 2021). This finding echoes Garcia-Carpintero et al's

(2020) work on the ever-present fear of sexual violence in young women's navigation of public space. As the participants highlight, this fear can significantly inhibit young women's access to public spaces, particularly at night. In turn, many young women in Garcia-Carpintero and colleagues' (2020) study describe reliance on avoidance strategies – avoiding certain streets, avoiding going out after dark – or being accompanied by male peers and/or family members in order to mitigate risk. The young women's concerns around women and girl's street safety were substantiated by T1 and T3, who situated the prevention of VAWG as a key motivation for RSE delivery in both schools (section 5.2, p. 141). T1 reflected on the Sarah Everard case, constructing it as indicative of the pressing need for better education around sexual violence. Further, T3 reflected on his positionality as a father to daughters, and his own fears for their safety in public (section 5.2, p. 141). Whilst both teachers identified VAWG prevention as a central driving factor for their own involvement in RSE, the fear and anxiety expressed by the young women suggests that they do not feel substantively supported in this area. Tackling VAWG requires systemic change, and the responsibility to support the street-safety of women and girls should not be borne solely by schools (NASWUT, 2024). Nevertheless, schools have been identified as potentially conducive environments for gender-based violence, and as such, play an important role in tackling the onset of instances of VAWG and misogynistic attitudes (Kelly, 2016). In turn, this raises the question of how schools, such as Schools A and B, can better support and address young women's warranted concerns around their personal safety through RSE delivery.

Sasha, Lily and Saffi also highlight the prolificity of image based sexual harassment on social media:

> Lily: *'I always get sent some stuff.'*
>
> Sasha: *'Yeah on snapchat you get like random people adding you.'*
>
> *'there's always going to be a next person to block.'*
>
> Saffi: *'but I never open the messages because you never know what it's gonna be.'*

All three girls construct virtual sexual harassment as an inevitability of social media usage – further imbedding gender-based violence as part and parcel of 21st century girlhood. The receipt of unsolicited sexual imagery – or 'dick pics' – is an increasingly ubiquitous and normalised aspect of adolescent girls' sexual worlds (Ricciardelli and Adorjan, 2018). For Sasha, unwanted images usually came from unknown accounts on Snapchat. This echoes Ringrose, Regehr and Whitehead's (2021) findings that unsolicited dick pics from strangers online, who notably were usually adults, had become an inevitable aspect of Snapchat usage for their participants. Ringrose and colleagues (2021) also note that many girls experienced unsolicited imagery from male peers, many of which were understood to be transactional in nature – attempting to coerce the young women to send images in return. Interestingly, the participants in School A emphasised that their experiences of unsolicited images were nearly always from strangers. Both Sasha and Saffi describe having to develop vigilant methods to mitigate unwanted images, such as blocking accounts and not opening messages from strangers. The participants in Ringrose, Regehr and Whitehead's (2021) study expressed similar methods of managing the harassment; blocking, ignoring or not-fully opening messages in efforts to dissuade the senders. Further, their participants highlighted that they rarely reported the harassment, as they felt the disappearing nature of Snapchat messages would prevent any action from being taken. Instead, many girls described an approach of 'you laugh and carry on' (Ringrose, Regehr and Whitehead, 2021, p. 564). As Ringrose and Colleagues (2021) argue, young women are not able to use nude images of men as 'trophies' in the same way young men can use images of women – instead, the receipt of nudes can be a significant source of stigmatisation, shame and embarrassment. Overall, the experiences of the participants in School A speak to an entrenched climate of sexual harassment for young women, in which they are forced to act vigilantly in order to maintain their safety. Interestingly, sexual harassment and gender-based violence were not raised as prominent themes by the participants in School B.

6.3 Sexual Values and Moral Framework

6.3a Aligning Self as Ally

All of the participants in School A clearly positioned themselves as LGBTQ+ allies and constructed this as an important part of their sexual values. Sasha, Ella and Saffi highlighted increased acceptance and awareness of LGBTQ+ identities, particularly through social media, as a defining characteristic of contemporary society:

> Sasha: '*I think there's less stigma about being just openly gay'*
> *'like a modern society. There's going to be gay people, there's going to be trans people'*
> Ella: '*Because there's like, especially on social media, like you know about it more, because people talk about it.'*
> Saffi: '*the kind of time we're living in so there's loads of different pronouns'*

Notably, this reflects the values set out by all three teachers, who identified LGBTQ+ inclusion as a core consideration within their practice (section 5.4, p. 158). As explored in Chapter 5 (p.120), this represents a significant dissention between the values of Catholic school communities , and the practices and teachings of the Catholic church. However, whilst the Teachers self-identified with more inclusive sexual values, this is did not necessarily result in inclusive RSE practices from the student participants perspectives (see section 7.2d, p. 222).

Nadia, Sasha and Saffi also demonstrate astute awareness that discrimination towards LGBTQ+ people remains rife within school and society more broadly:

> Nadia: '*I think we need to talk about how that [gender] can change. And that doesn't make [pause] you any less of a person.'*
>
> Sasha: '*if you see a straight, lots of straight people, you just automatically think that that's like the default'.*
>
> Saffi: '*because they're gay now doesn't change them'*

Nadia and Saffi allude to LGBTQ+ people being treated differently by peers after 'coming out'. Sasha adeptly highlights the prevalence of heteronormativity, with heterosexuality being assumed as the 'default' sexual identity. Abbott, Ellis and Abbott (2015) found that this assumption often plays out in the context of RSE, with teachers assuming heterosexuality as the default position of students. As a result, they argue that sex education is predominantly delivered through 'macro level' teaching that assumes LGBTQ+ identity to be an exception to the norm (Abbott, Ellis and Abbott, 2015, p.1645). As Sasha reflects, the heterosexist assumption of straightness as the 'default' is potentially also fuelled by a lack of representation of LGBTQ+ people. It is unclear whether Sasha is describing the culture of School A specifically, or society more broadly. Nevertheless, she highlights a pervasive and potentially damaging norm that, as explored in section 7.2c (p. 221), permeates RSE delivery and impact.

6.3b Sex Negative Moral Frameworks and Fear of Sexual Consequences

All participants reflected their own individually constructed moral frameworks, through which they contextualised sexuality and relationships around them. For Ella, Sasha, Saffi and Nadia, determinants of 'right' and 'wrong' in the context sex and relationships appeared to draw from a variety of broader societal narratives.

Ella: '*You just realise, oh that's good, that's bad.'*

Sasha: '*if they're in a relationship. It's more like, 'Oh, you've done it,' it's not like 'urgh [disgust noise] you've done it'.*

'*You're not really meant to be doing that'*

Nadia: *'Probably because you can't have children at our age.'*

Saffi: '*periods and that, I definitely would speak to my mum about, but like, not sex.'*

Ella describes RSE as enabling her to categorise 'good' or 'bad' manifestations of sex and relationships, in turn reflecting a construction of clear binarized moral categories. Interestingly, Sasha's quotations explore broader 'sex-negative' narratives, as she reflects on the social construction of sex outside of committed relationships as morally suspect, and the prominent construction of sex as prohibited behaviour. This is potentially also reflected in Saffi's construction of permissible topics to discuss with her Mum, with sex construed as less acceptable than periods. It is arguable that Saffi also perhaps anticipates sex being a more uncomfortable topic for both her and her mother. Parental discomfort in discussing sex with their children is a widely documented issue (Stone et al, 2017; Bennett et al 2017; Elliot, 2010). Notably, Elliot (2010) found that even where some mothers wanted to engage in more open conversations about sex with their adolescent children, they froze or 'clammed up' in the moment, reflecting their own anxieties around sexuality but also fears around their ability to provide information in an effective and appropriate manor.

Nadia's asserts that 'you can't have children at our age' in response to RSE lessons focused on marriage and procreation feeling irrelevant. She does not refer to biological possibility, but rather what is understood as socially expected and accepted during the adolescent life stage. Her quotation presents adolescent pregnancy and/or motherhood as inconceivable, which in turn presents a clear distinction between morally accepted ways of being and enacting sexuality as a young woman. This evokes Lesko's (2012, p. 136) argument that the societal admonition of teenage mothers as resting on construction of a 'disjunctive moment' from the

'proper' life order. Further, in presenting her age group and childbearing as mutually exclusive, Nadia reflects an understanding of herself and her peers as *not yet* adult – potentially even children. As such, her assertion that you 'can't' have children at their age draws on normative ideals of childhood as chaste (see section 2.6c, p. 43), and sexuality and childbearing as fundamentally adult characteristics (Murcott, 1980).

Discourses of sex as morally suspect are further presented by Mia, Lily and Sasha, who describe a prevalent fear of consequences from sexual behaviour, including reputational damage, unwanted pregnancy, and punishment from adults:

> Sasha: *'maybe sanctions and stuff because you're not really meant to be doing that'*
>
> *'if there's like rumours going around about a girl, that boy would expect that girl to do stuff'*
>
> *'You'd rather talk about it than have like a teen pregnancy'*
>
> *'because I hear a lot of stuff about my friends. It's just a bit upsetting because they haven't.'*
>
> Lily: *'people our age, sometimes don't understand what an actual relationship is. And they just get into relationships, because they want to have the concept of being in a relationship'.*
>
> Mia: *'people shouldn't like base you off, like your relationship or something like that'*

Sasha reflects anxiety around soliciting advice around sexual health from staff due to fear that adults will impose 'sanctions' for engaging in perceived prohibited behaviour. She also depicts the prevalence of rumours surrounding girls' sexual behaviours as adding to and intensifying coercive pressure to engaging in sexual activity. Building on this, she presents a strong desire to defend her friends from rumours surrounding their sex lives, with a view that such narratives are detrimental to their reputation. Similar reputational anxiety was expressed by participants in Dobson's (2019) study surrounding online slut-shaming. Girls

were found to be particularly concerned around 'unjust' sexual rumours and sexist-name calling – thus, rumours about young women that had not engaged in sex. For Dobson's participants, concern waned when discussing girls who *had* engaged in sexual behaviours due to a sense that they had brought reputational damage onto themselves (Dobson, 2019). In turn, girls reflected a rigid set of behavioural expectations that must be followed in order to preserve their social reputation, summarised by one participant as 'don't portray yourself as a slut, don't do slutty things' (Dobson, 2019, p. 11). This indicates the pervasive influence of societal expectations for young women to appear chaste and sexually undesiring on young women's perception of both their self and their peers.

Similarly, Mia reflects on the fact that young women's relationship status can strongly inform how others perceive them, further demonstrating social policing of women's sexual behaviours. Lily reflects a narrative of right and wrong reasons to engage in romantic relationships. In my view, this reflects the emphasis placed on responsibility and risk mitigation within policy constrictions of adolescent sexuality, as explored in sections 2.4b and 2.4c (p. 26 onwards). Overall, the young women describe a near constant pressure to manage their – and sometimes their friends' – expressions of sexuality due to perceived social and potentially physical consequences. This echoes Tolman's description of young women of colour being forced to navigate sexuality whilst 'looking over their shoulder' due to prevalent sexualisation and stigma (Tolman, 1994, p. 173) (see section 2.5a. p. 37).

Fear of sexual consequences, be that physical or social, emerged as a prevalent theme for Krista and Nisha during the focus group at School B:

Krista: *'seeing like what happened to other people? It wasn't always bad. It was just like, they couldn't even talk to each other?'*

'although like pregnancy is, like, lovely having a child but when you're young, you're basically a child raising a child so it's like, it's not ideal'

'not that you shouldn't go on dating, but, like, what will happen if you do, say like, the consequences of everything'

'the main priority should be like being safe and like knowing like the consequences of your actions'

Nisha: *'what could possibly happen, how it could affect your life if you don't do some stuff.'*

'like it's okay to like someone but then going into a relationship could be risky.'

Krista highlights seeing the impact of others' relationship breakdowns as a deterrent for engaging romantic and sexual relationships herself. She further reckons with the risk of unplanned, adolescent pregnancy, constructing childbearing as 'lovely' in general but 'not ideal' for her age group. Notably, she draws upon the rhetoric of 'children having children' (Murcott, 1980) to explain this dichotomy. In emphasising pregnancy as 'lovely', it is possible Krista draws on the broader veneration of procreation and motherhood withing Catholic theology (Vraney, 1981), and in turn, within her Catholic upbringing and schooling. In highlighting this juxtaposition, she appears to situate unplanned pregnancy as one of the most pressing consequences of sexual activity. Building on this, she argues that knowing 'the consequences of your actions' ought to be a central aim of RSE content, which further constructs sex as something potentially damaging and highly consequential. Furthermore, she emphasises degree of individual responsibility to know of and avoid risks associated with sexual behaviour. This sentiment is also expressed by Nisha, who highlights the potential for life-altering consequences from not doing 'some stuff'. It appears Nisha alludes to engaging in unprotected sex here, but her lack of specificity contributes to a broader sense of sex as an amorphous threat. Finally, both Nisha and Krista emphasise that whilst romantic interest in permissible, acting on that interest poses a potential risk, implying that

this is something people her age shouldn't do. Notably, the centrality of risk mitigation and individual responsibility within the girls' conceptualisations of sex echoes T2 and T3's descriptions of their central motivations of delivering RSE (see section 5.2, p. 144).

The prevalent construction of adolescent sexuality as 'risky' within both pupil and staff narratives is indicative of the centrality of this ethos within sexual health and education policy, in England and globally, over recent years (see section 2.4d, p. 28) (Kirby, 2007). As argued in section 2.4b (p. 26), this approach is reflective of the broad ontological understand of adolescence as a period of impulsivity and libidinousness (Bay-Cheng, 2003). This, combined with neoliberal conceptions of subjectivity (Besley, 2010), has produced the dominant 'informed decision maker' pedagogy for sex education adopted across Western contexts; adults provide information, and young people are expected to use that information to make 'responsible', individual decisions to mitigate sexual risks (Jones, 2011, p. 378). Whilst preventing sexual harm should be central in any comprehensive RSE programmes, an over-focus on risk, consequences, and responsibility can reinforce a divisive and unhelpful narrative of 'unsanctioned' versus 'sanctioned' sexual behaviour (Shoveller and Johnson. 2006). In turn, this can evoke feelings of shame and perceptions of character deficit in young people who engage in 'risk taking' sexual behaviours and can further the marginalisation of groups perceived as 'risky', such as gay young men (Shoveller and Johnson, 2006, p.51).

With regard to the young women in the present study, I am also conscious that the construction of sexual consequence is highly shaped by normative gender structures. Fine's (1992) discourses of sexuality as violence, victimisation, and individual morality seem as prevalent in the voices of the young women I spoke to as they did nearly three decades before. Fear of consequence represents an understandable response to the defensive position – against male sexual violence, reputational damage, social ostracization STIs, unplanned pregnancy – young women are forced to assume due to our discursive presentation of female sexuality (Fine, 1992). Further, fear of sexual consequence is integral to the venerated 'Can Do' girl position, characterised by the appearance of sexual agency, economic capacity, and appropriate fertility (Harris, 2003). To fear the consequences of sex

is also to understand 'At Risk' girlhood as an intolerable positionality (Harris, 2003) (see section 2.5e, p. 35).

6.3c Distancing from Sexual Desire and Discomfort Discussing Sex

Throughout our conversation, Ruby, Krista, and Nisha also could be seen to distance themselves from sexual desires and behaviours:

> Ruby: '*I've heard stories of like, people that were like, really good, they were willing to wait till marriage'*
> '*No [laughs] like relationships, right. Like just talking.'*
> Krista: '*I feel like it doesn't matter what you tell people to do, I think some people are just gonna go ahead and do it'*
> Nisha: '*I feel like people when they're listening to it, they obviously like know the consequences but don't take it seriously'*

In constructing waiting until marriage as being 'good', Ruby reflects an understanding of abstinence as morally superior to pre-marital sex. This reflects the positioning of marriage as the only permissible context for sex within traditional Catholic sexual ethics, as explored in section 3.3d (i) (p. 76) (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2019). This collusion makes sense given Ruby's Catholic identity (see section 7.3b, p. 245). Later in our conversation, Krista misunderstood something Ruby said as referring to sex, to which Ruby quickly asserted that she meant 'just talking'. In turn, she removes any implication of her being understood as sexually desirous. Across all of the quotations above, the participants use the third person to refer to those engaging in sexual behaviour, further constructing sex as something done by 'other people'. It is important to note this may well reflect their age and life experiences so far, rather than an intentional attempt to other sexual behaviour. However, considering the broad social construction of sex as physically and morally risky for young women (Fine, 1992), it also makes sense that Ruby may not want to identify herself as a sexual being. Notably,

Krista and Nisha highlight that regardless of risk-focused messaging, many young people will still engage in sex, constructing themselves as exceptions to the rule. Nisha returns to the idea of sexual consequences and the notion that sex must be 'taken seriously'. This reflects an understanding of sexual decisions focused on pleasure – rather than risk – as potentially frivolous and irresponsible. As highlighted by Fine (1992) and Tolman (2002), this narrative speaks to the broader societal repression of young women's sexual subjectivity and capacity for sexual desire.

The participants in School B also reflected significant discomfort when discussing sex outside of school, both with family, and more surprisingly, with their peers.

> Ruby: '*I can talk about stuff in the news with my parents all the time, like rape and sexual assault, Yeah, stuff like that. But I'm not too sure about like, the actual sex and relationships side of it*'
>
> Nisha: '*I feel like, you wouldn't just like, what, talk about it with my friends, I wouldn't just talk about it*'
>
> Krista: '*not really like, my friends, I feel like I tell them about experiences and ask what to do, but I wouldn't, like, go to them outright.*'
>
> Ada: '*I'd probably more end up like joking about something with my friends if it came up in conversation.*'

Ruby highlights that she feels comfortable discussing sexual violence with her parents, particularly in the context of news stories, yet feels unsure of talking about 'the actual sex and relationships side'. This poses the question of why we feel more comfortable discussing violence than consensual sexual behaviours? Ruby's feelings of discomfort discussing sex and relationships with her parents may reflect a pre-emptive assumption of parental discomfort (Stone et al, 2017; Bennett et al 2017; Elliot, 2010), echoing Saffi's experience discussed in the previous section. However, it is also possible her construction as sexual violence as a more comfortable topic has something to do with a discomfort in identifying as

sexually agentic. Young women's ability to identify as sexual subjects is highly constrained by gendered social scripts that simultaneously idealise women's sexual passivity, and individual responsibility to resist male advances and sexual risks (Thompson, 1990; Tolman, 2002; Fine, 1992; Bay-Cheng, 2015). In turn, discussion of the threat of sexual violence colludes with the broader societal discourse surrounding women's sexuality as violence and victimisation (Fine, 1992) – potentially making it more familiar ground for Ruby and her parents alike.

Notably, Ruby's Catholic identity may further compound her attempts to distance herself from sexual and relational desire. Catholic sexual ethics are rooted in deeply patriarchal social scripts, that idealise the image of the chaste, pious woman (Jung,2000; Vraney, 1981). Further, as argued by Ruether (2000) traditional Christian theology situates bodily pleasure as a diversion from the transcendental, thus detracting from holiness. As such, feminist psychotherapy finds that Christian women may wrestle with the 'Madonna-whore' complex in their own navigation of sexuality; viewing desire as overly libidinous and struggling with feelings of anxiety and shame (Ogden, 2008; Mahoney, 2008). Whilst the intersection of faith and sexuality can in fact be experienced as liberating for some (Daniluk and Browne, 2008), it is critically important to acknowledge the potentially constrictive impact of Catholic sexual values on young women. T2 also reckons with conflict between her faith and sexuality, particularly as a divorced woman (section 5.4, p. 156). Her experience also reflects navigation of the theological Madonna/Whore dichotomy as she describes her feelings of alienation whilst listening to the parable of the 'adulterous woman' (p.118). It is notable that whilst both young women and staff within the school may wrestle with feelings of incompatibility between sexuality and Catholic femininity, this potential area of conflict is largely unaddressed within RSE.

Both Nisha and Krista emphasise that they would not feel comfortable talking about sex with their friends. For Nisha, the idea of doing as such is presented as almost inconceivable, whereas Krista draws distinction between talking about experiences and asking for advice and talking about sex 'outright'. What would it mean to discuss sex outright? What does this look like and why is it more problematic than the other modes of discussion? Again, it is arguable that Nisha and Krista's feelings are compounded by gendered-sexual scripts, but

also their proximity to Catholic values, within their home and school lives. As young women of colour, it is also possible that Ruby, Nisha and Krista's experiences are further constrained by the sexual stigmatisation of racially minoritised women (see section 2.5e, p. 36). As found by Tolman (1994), racially minoritised and working-class girls report high degrees of self-policing their sexual expression and desire in order to evade sexual stereotyping.

Interestingly, Ada highlights the centrality of humour in her friend-group conversations about sex. Allen (2014) argues that humour can be used to dissipate tension when discussing potentially taboo topics within RSE – and this appears to be echoed in Ada's experience with her friends. Further, jokes about sex and relationships are an embedded aspect of society – therefore, it makes sense that young people replicate this (Allen, 2014). Allen (2014) further argues that humour could be co-opted as a productive learning tool within RSE, as a means to bolster engagement and reduce hesitance to addressing certain topics. However, comedy is traditionally constructed as counter-intuitive to the 'serious' task of learning and classroom management (Allen, 2014). This is reflected T2's in feelings of needing to manage and curtail laughter and jokes in the RSE classroom (see section 5.3, p. 149). This reveals a notable gap between how staff and students conceptualise behaviours within RSE. To Ada, humour is a natural response to discussing tricky and sometimes uncomfortable topics with her friends, yet for T2, jokes and laughter are understood as standing in the way of her performing her role as an RSE provider. This point of tension is explored more substantively in section 7.2e (p. 229).

6.4 Gendered Division:

6.4a Lack of understanding from male peers

All participants at School A reflected not feeling understood by their male peers. This appears to indicate a wider sense of gendered disconnect, primarily surrounding conversations around menstruation and sexual harassment.

Nadia: *'Some [boys] think they don't have to know what it's like'*
They're gonna have a girlfriend or a daughter. They're gonna have to deal with stuff like that'
Mia: *'I just think some don't care if i'm honest. Some people, some boys just don't really care about it.'*
Sasha: *'Or they'll be like it's 'not all men'.*
Lily: *'it'd be awkward, talking about it. You know, with this tension like'*
Saffi: *'we always get that when we're on our period.'*
Ella: *'Some guys, who are like educated are okay'*
'if they have sisters, or have a good approach on it, okay.'

Mia and Sasha highlight feeling that their male peers lacked empathy and accountability in conversations about sexual harassment and violence. When asked if she would feel comfortable discussing sexual harassment and street safety with her male friends, Lily reflects that such conversations would be awkward and tense. Flood (2019) argues that young men commonly exhibit defensive responses to conversations around gender inequality and sexual violence, particularly where male privilege is explored. Ging et al (2023) found that such responses from boys were tied to three prominent issues; feeling male experiences of sexual violence are overlooked, feeling men are unfairly negatively portrayed, and desire for a more inclusive and nuanced approach to gender-related violence (i.e. LGBTQ+ inclusion, exploring role of masculinity). In the following sections (6.5b; 6.5c), I explore the participants' expressions of empathy for boys' feeling alienated in the RSE classroom. It is possible that this alienation further contributes to the unempathetic and hostile responses they observed from their male peers.

A sense of gendered disconnect is also felt by Nadia, Saffi and Ella in the context of menstruation. Saffi and Sasha reflected that their main friendship group was predominantly male, and as such, they often were subject to jokes about being 'moody' when menstruating. Erchull (2020) argues jokes and teasing surrounding menstruation are often

used by boys, from an early age, to assert patriarchal gender hierarchies. 'Teasing' of this nature speaks to broader harmful stereotypes surrounding menstruating women, particularly surrounding pre-menstrual emotiveness – as experienced by Saffi and Sasha (Erchull, 2020). This echoes the all-too-common experience, as found by Newton (2016), of women being asked by men if they are menstruating if they react to something emotionally. For Nadia, it appears that many of her male peers do not feel a need to engage in menstrual education, but in her view, this education is vital for men supporting future partners and/or children. The centrality of education in bolstered inter-gender understanding is highlighted by Ella, who highlights that boys who have received education of periods 'are okay'. Notably, Erchull (2020) finds that opportunities for menstrual education for boys are extremely limited globally, with much information being gained informally through peers and/or family. This is supported by Allen, Kaestle, and Goldberg (2011) who find that many young men first learned about menstruation for the first time due to their sister/s experiencing it. As such, Ella's feeling that boys with sisters may be more understanding may in fact be substantiated by research. Interestingly, the young women's desire for menstruation to be understood by male peers echoes T2's construction of her boyfriend's unwillingness to discuss 'woman's stuff' as indicative of the need for gender-inclusive menstrual education (section 5.2,, p. 141). Across all of the expressions of this theme, a palpable, and largely unmet, desire to be seen and understood by male peers is apparent.

6.4b Empathy for Boys' Experiences

Alongside a sense of not feeling understood by their male peers, many of the participants across Schools A and B recognised the pressures of hegemonic masculinity on young men and boys. For the girls in School A, this principally centred around the constraints on boys' expressions of emotion and vulnerability:

Lily: *'they kind of grew up to, like, don't express their feelings. They're just holding it inside.'*

Sasha: *'they're expected to be like, strong and not talk about it, but I think some boys do, like, feel, they just can't talk about it [pause] Especially with their friends.'*

'Like male teachers talking about their experiences'

Saffi: *'They might feel uncomfortable with like, if girls are in the room'.*

'Yeah, I'd prefer if they cried and told me how they're feeling.'

Nadia: *'We don't really care if like, they're weak'.*

Lily and Sasha describe the weight of the social expectations surrounding masculinity on their male peers. Both Saffi and Nadia emphasise that they would not care if boys deviated from masculine ideals, and in fact, might prefer if their male peers and/or partners were more emotionally expressive. Interestingly, Saffi is also conscious of the constraints of gendered hierarchies on boys' engagement in RSE lessons. When discussing the possibility of including more RSE lessons on men's experiences, she highlighted that the pressure to perform masculinity in the presence of girls may preclude boys from engaging in such topics. Saffi's reflection is reminiscent of Keddie's (2022) argument that the engagement of boys in gender-transformative RSE requires a certain degree of vulnerability and openness from them, and this is often hindered by harmful, rigid ideals of masculinity. Keddie (2022, p.408) further argues that highlighting 'shared vulnerabilities of the masculine experience' is a critical tool to overcoming these barriers to engagement. Notably, this is also articulated in Sasha's suggestion that boys' may feel more able to engage if male teachers also shared their experiences of navigating masculinity and emotions.

Participants in School B similarly expressed empathy for young men's experiences, however, this was largely in the context of feeling that their school had failed to address male experiences of sexual violence:

Ruby: *'we should talk also about the male side of rape and sexual assault'*

Chloe: *'we had a male teacher for the bit on sexual assault, but it's still all about how, um, it affects women.'*

Nisha: *'it's always good to like, obviously, educate the boys on, if they feel like something's wrong then at least they know what it is.'*

Krista: *'Like everything else is like for girls.'*

Ruby and Chloe's quotations highlight that coverage of sexual violence within their RSE had omitted male experiences of sexual violence, focusing instead on women's experiences. As will be addressed more substantively in section 7.5a (i) (p. 254), this contributes to a broader sense that pupils are denied access to the 'full picture' of sex and relationships within RSE and are keenly aware of areas of missing narrative. Interestingly, Nisha positions boys as potentially less equipped to identify unhealthy or harmful relationship dynamics as a result of this omission of male experiences. This desire to see experiences beyond their own reflected in RSE is notable, and almost constructs the school coverage of women's experiences of sexual violence as mundane. This is perhaps indicative of School B's recent push, since the Ofsted report on peer-on-peer sexual violence in schools, to tackle sexual harassment towards young women which saw an increase in their teaching provision on this issue (see T3, section 5.2, p. 142).

The omission of male experiences is further reflected in Krista's assertion that the majority of RSE topics are 'for girls'. Research by Keddie (2021; 2022) and Ging et al (2024) shows that girls often feel concerned about boys feeling attacked or blamed during class discussions of sexual violence, and also strongly advocate for content that addressed men and women's experiences of sexual violence in equal measure. Ging et al (2024) argue that these responses may represent girls' own discomfort in reckoning with the unequal and gendered nature of sexual violence in society. Further, they argue that emphasis on 'equality' within this rhetoric is indicated of pervasive post-feminist, neoliberal ideals within schools; whereby students and staff may be keen to signify support of fairness and

inclusivity, but do not engage with underlying power structures (such as misogyny and the disparate rates of gender-based violence against women) (Ging et al, 2024). Whilst these factors are at play within the girls' responses, I feel they simultaneously touch upon a tangible failure to engage with the nuance of gender structures within RSE, which in turn disservices young men and women alike (Keddie, 2021;2022).

6.4c Observing Gendered Behaviour

Some participants in School B perceived their male peers to be less engaged in RSE lessons, and more likely to behave disruptively. Nisha and Ruby attributed this behaviour to boys being less mature and therefore less able to sit with discomfort than girls:

> Nisha: *'Boys do tend to mature later than girls…'*
> Ruby: *'they just can't, like cope with like, a lot of information about like, what's seen as like an uncomfortable topic'*

Notably, both girls defer to a normative and essentialised rhetoric surrounding gender in the classroom which situates boys as more disruptive, harder to manage, and more childlike; and girls as quieter, better behaved, and 'mature' (Perander et al, 2020; Bhana, 2009). This is reinforced by T2's reflection on inappropriate questions within RSE: '*the obvious, always from the boys, 'Are we doing practicals?'* (p.113). The gendered difference in how pupils respond to RSE may well reflect the discursive treatment of young women's sexuality – given the gravity of risk presented, girls have no choice *but* to engage. However, as will be explored in section 7.2d (p. 214 onwards), the young women also identify relevance and relatability as contingent factors for their engagement in RSE. If male experiences are under-addressed, and pupils perceive topics to be 'for girls', it is also possible that their male peers' behaviour is indicative of a failure to effectively engage young men in RSE. This becomes problematic considering the Women and Equalities committee (2023) recommendation that engaging young men and boys in RSE is a crucial step towards tackling

harmful sexual cultures and sexual abuse amongst young people. The landscape described by the participants in this study suggests this is not yet being done effectively.

Nisha, Krista and Ruby also identify gendered differences in how boys engage in romantic relationships, furthering a sense of disconnect between them and their male peers:

> Nisha: *'they're probably just doing it for the experience, instead of like doing it to, like, obviously, like, be with that person'*
> Krista: *'I feel like boys look for the more sexual side of things.'*
> Ruby: *'when girls get into a relationship, they'll more talk about like the personality side of it.'*

The participants reflect the normative narrative of 'boys want sex, girls want romance' (Giordano et al, 2006). Giordano and colleagues (2006) argue that this this rhetoric is indicative of the gendered socialisation of boy and girls, with girls taught to value personal relationships, and boys taught that heterosexuality is tied to masculine social status. The situation of personality and romance as the primary motivators for relationships for girls also reflects a broader construction of men and boys as sexual initiators, and women and girls as recipients and 'gatekeepers' of sexuality (Tolman, 2012, p.748). This further suggests an absence of 'desire discourse' for young women within the societal framing of adolescent relationships.

6.4d Gender-segregated RSE

The majority of participants across both schools reported having received at least some gender segregated RSE during primary school:

Sasha: *'It said 'do not disturb' on the door.'*

Mia: *'think they watched the same videos as us. We watched the video in the hall and they watched it in like the classrooms'*

Krista: *'they did masturbation as well, but we never did that.'*

Ada: *'In year 5 the girls talked about periods…'*

I include this theme within this chapter as the normalisation of gender-segregated school RSE may contribute to the broader sense of gendered division and disconnect reported by the participants during secondary school. Sasha highlights a sense of curiosity surrounding what boys learnt behind the closed 'do not disturb' door. Krista and Ada highlight the explicit production of topics 'for boys' versus 'for girls', whereas Mia describes teaching the same topics in different spaces. Gender separation during PSHE and RSE lessons is lawful in the UK as 'boys and girls may have different needs in this context' (Department for Education, 2018, p.5), so long as both groups receive the necessary curricula content, and neither group is disadvantaged by the approach. Little current research specifically addresses the prevalence or impact of gender-segregated sex education in the UK, however, limited research from the early 2000s appears to construct gender-separation as a useful tool to maintain pupil comfort and ensure both girls and boys specific sex education needs are met sufficiently (Hilton, 2001; Strange et al, 2003). Whilst the integration of this approach may be well-intentioned, the delineation of separate gendered needs with RSE holds the potential to reinforce potentially harmful gender norms and binaries, as shown in the participant data. Furthermore, many of the young women reflected a desire for mutual understanding across gender binaries, something that I feel would be difficult to achieve whilst physically and discursively separating classes along gendered lines.

6.5 Social-Sexual Pressures

6.5a Gendered sexual expectations and social pressure

Ella, Sasha, Nadia and Mia highlight the weight of gendered-sexual expectations within their sexual landscapes:

> Ella: '*I mean, you just hear this and that. Some girls have to do this. Because of guys.*'
>
> Sasha: '*like pressure as well. If you're not ready you shouldn't do it.*'
>
> Mia: '*I can't really explain it, Guys, if a girl like them, they don't really get pressured to do anything. But if a girl, if a guy likes a girl, then like everybody's talking about it. It's big thing?*'
>
> '*like certain people say there's like certain girls that do it. And, and certain girls that don't*'
>
> Nadia: '*because like there's rumours that other people have done stuff. And then other people haven't.*'
>
> '*It's not like you could avoid them when you go to school with them?*'.

This is echoed by Krista, Ruby, Nisha and Ada in school B, for whom navigating social pressure to engage in sex and relationships emerges as a prominent theme:

Krista: *'let's say you didn't have a lot of friends and then your only friend got a boyfriend, then?'*

Ruby: *'if your friend's like dating someone then you feel like more pressure to start and stuff.'*

Ada: *'There's like a lot of pressure to be in a relationship while you're, because like, everyone else is sort of getting in one…I think they don't focus enough on how you can just be happy without that and how it's not actually that important to worry so much about, like, for example, like losing your virginity and getting in relationships really early.'*

Nisha: *'obviously, this is the age where you start liking people, is it not?'*.

Notably, there is a difference in the kinds of social pressure highlighted by participants across the two schools. Ella, Mia, Sasha and Nadia appear to emphasise forms of external pressure - rumours, sexual reputations, and pressure enacted by partners. Ella, Sasha and Nadia identify sexual pressure as a prevalent concern within their social worlds. This reflects the findings of Brady and Lowe's (2020) study, in which the majority of young women participants reported concerns around being 'nagged' or 'pestered' into unwanted sex by partners. Instances of sexual coercion such as this appear prevalent within young people's lives, with 42% of participants (of all genders) in Vannier and O'Sullivan's study (2009) reporting their partner enacting sexual pressure at sometime within their relationship. Further, they found that even where direct pressure was not applied, many young people understood 'sexual compliance' to be part of the implicit contract of romantic relationships (Vannier and O'Sullivan, 2009). Evading sexual pressure is further complicated, as Nadia highlighted, by sharing educational and social spaces with those who instigate it.

Whilst sexual pressure is experienced by young people of all genders (Brady and Lowe, 2020; Setty, 2022), it is important to acknowledge the role of normative gender roles and sexual scripts in shaping these interactions. Brady and Lowe (2020) emphasise that capacity to consent to sex is highly shaped by gendered social scripts, with the onus of sexually

pleasing one's partner, and maintaining the relationship placed on women. Further, young men report that normative expectations for men to be sexually 'dominant' and desiring may lead them to enact sexual pressure towards partners, but also, notably, to engage in sex they themselves do not want (Setty, 2022). These gender norms may further explain the construction of boys' interest in girls as a 'big thing', as highlighted by Mia, as sexual initiation becomes tied to performance of masculine ideals in a way it is not for expressions of femininity. Further, the construction of girls' interest in boys as less consequential, and thus less pressuring, further reflects the embedded societal dismissal of young women's capacity for desire and sexual agency (Tolman, 2012; Fine, 1992).

It is clear that gender norms play a significant role in young people's sexual scripts and persist in generating harmful narratives surrounding expected sexual behaviours for boys and girls alike. Such norms are plausibly maintained by a discursive shift towards affirmative consent in RSE content, without substantive critical engagement with gendered sexual scripts and expectations (Setty, 2023).Interestingly, whilst street safety was raised, the navigation of consent in adolescent relationships did not emerge within the teacher interviews. This potentially indicates a significant gap between student and staff conceptualisations of priorities within RSE. As the students persistently highlighted, much of the RSE they received was 'too little, too late'. Thus, this gap may be reflective of adult misconceptions surrounding young people's lived experiences of sexuality. This may not have occurred as a prominent concern for staff as they simply may not have thought the young women discussed would have experienced situations in which sexual pressure may have occurred. However, as the participants highlight, gendered sexual scripts are imbedded within their social worlds and peer groups, even if they themselves have not been in that situation.

Both Mia and Nadia depict a division between girls that 'do it' and those that don't, which arguably mirrors the broader construction of 'At Risk' versus 'Can Do' modes of girlhood outlined in section 2.5e (p. 35). The binary produced between girls that 'do' sex and those that do not clearly reflects societally embedded nature of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy, within which women are understood as either 'abstinent and virtuous' or '[sexually] active and therefore contemptible' (Bay-Cheng, 2015, p. 281). Notably, Bay-Cheng (2015, p. 285)

argues that this model insufficient captures the increasing obligation for women to appear sexually agentic and 'doing it for themselves' within neoliberal society. However, this rhetoric was largely absent from the participants' accounts. Tolman (2015) argues that the 'slut/prude/virgin' continuum best describes the hegemonic expectations imposed on young women's sexual expression. Yet, again, the participants in this study appear to reflect a much more binary position. The delineation of 'girls that do it' within the school landscape also reflects the 'stickiness' of women's sexual reputation (Tolman, 2012). Tolman (2012;2015) refers specifically to way in the which the label 'slut' pervasively shapes the perception and treatment of women's sexuality long after alleged or actual behaviour. As Mia and Nadia describe, it appears to be known as a girl that 'does it' operates in the same way, used by others as a permanent identity marker.

The mode of sexual pressure highlighted by the participants at School B is one emergent from comparison to others and fear of being 'left behind' the peer group. Furthermore, as adeptly captured by Nisha, they are faced to navigate normative social expectations of adolescence as 'the age where you start liking people'. Ada also identifies a significant gap in RSE provision – whilst social pressure to engage in relationships may emerge from peers, RSE has also failed to explore being single as a fulfilling option. Singleness is seldom explored within RSE research and practice, and Ada highlights a pressing area for further exploration – how can RSE support young people in feeling fulfilled outside of romantic relationships? It is arguable that the silence surrounding singlehood in RSE may intersect with and produce narratives and relationship ideals. Despite the increasing centrality of discourses of empowerment and sexual autonomy within neoliberal constructions of womanhood, women are still subject to significant pressure to conform to the ideal of marriage and family (Budgeon, 2016). It is also notable that this absence may be more pronounced in Catholic contexts given the centrality of the 'sacramental' marital relationship within Catholic sexual values, as exemplified within the CES' (2019, p.7) model curriculum. Notably, Catholic marital ideals within RSE also compound T2's feelings of alienation as a divorced woman (section 5.4, p. 156). Overall, in failing to address singlehood as a viable relationship option, RSE may inadvertently compound the pressure young people feel to engage in romantic and/or sexual relationships.

Ada's account speaks to wider superordinate theme of rejecting the idealisation of romantic relationships in society, which emerged for all of the other participants in School B:

> Nisha: *'it is put out there that being in a relationship is, like, really good and stuff, but you never know'.*
> Krista: *'the image of it because like, in the media having a relationship and this, that and the other is like, seen to be such a nice thing'.*
> Chloe: *'there should be more stuff teaching about like, how it's important to have, like, be happy without someone'.*
> Ruby: *'they think of like your first time being like really, like, amazing, but that's just not how it is in real life'*
> *'It [a relationship] should be the best thing that ever happened to you.'*

The participants appear highly cognisant of the idealisation of romantic relationships for women and, as Budgeon (2016, p.406) argues, that heterosexist societies privilege 'those lives most closely resembling a particular ideological model of love and intimacy'. The young women appear to resist and critique the centrality of romance within societal conceptions of feminine fulfilment and success (Budgeon, 2016). Building on this, Nisha and Ruby emphasised that they didn't necessarily feel the pressure to get into relationships themselves, reflecting a rejection of wider social narratives:

> Nisha: *'I don't think there's pressure. I feel like it depends on what you think. So let's say you've been educated well at home..'*
> Ruby: *'It's just a thing that just happens.'*

This resistance indicates that young women's experience of sex and relationships are shaped by a multiplicity of social and personal factors, and gendered social scripts will not necessarily be interpretated in the same way by individuals, even within shared contexts.

6.5b Relationships as a Social Event

For Nadia, Mia, Ella and Saffi, the overarching theme of socio-sexual was further expressed through a construction of relationships as a 'social event'. This master theme specifically refers to the social ramifications of engaging in a romantic relationship within school, beyond the dynamic between two partners. This speaks to a socio-sexual 'ecosystem' (Setty, 2023a, p. 4) in which young peoples' dating choices shape also shape how they engage with and are perceived by their peers.

> Ella: *'if you see someone like walking around at school dating. People, obviously, like, talk about it'*
> *'if you're going through it, it's obviously different for you because you're being attacked'*
> Saffi: *'I think it affects how they, like, behave a lot'.*
> *'They might feel uncomfortable with like, if girls are in the room, I don't know, like, if they've got a crush in there'*
> Nadia: '*I think it's [dating] everywhere'.*

I am particularly drawn to Ella's description of gossip and rumours about romantic and/or sexual relationships as 'being attacked'. This phrasing centres how exposed and vulnerable a young person might feel when their sexual behaviours become subject to this wider peer group interest. Further, as highlighted by Saffi, romantic interest is understood as something that can pervasively shape boys' behaviour and engagement in lessons. In turn, romantic and sexual dynamics are constructed as a powerful shaping factor in young women's lived experiences of the school community. Yet, as highlighted in section 7.2d

(p.225), participants from both schools emphasised a pervasive absence of conversations about adolescent relationships within their RSE lessons due to a predominant focus on marriage and 'adult' relationships. The absence indicates a significant failure to recognise the gravity of romantic and sexual relationships within young women's *current* experiences of the world around them, as depicted in the quotations above. This speaks to a broader absence of accurate reflections of pupils developmental and experiential needs within RSE, as addressed across section 7.2 (p. 214 onwards).

6.5c Fear of judgement and undesirability

Sasha, Lily, Ella and Mia expressed a fear of judgement, both from their peers and key adults in their lives:

> Sasha: '*when so many people have already views about you, it's hard to change?'*
> *'I feel you'd be, like, shamed almost, because like talking about the sex thing.'*
> Lily: '*because some people will have like real, opinions that are like, really strong. So really hard to like, try and change that.'*
> *Ella: 'People, obviously, like, talk about it, because they see it happening. So it could be like, about their appearance, personality.'*
> *Mia: 'I know it sounds bad, but like, parents can be more judgemental.'*

Two prominent ideas emerge across this theme. Firstly, that fear around shaming or judgemental responses from adults can be a prominent deterrent for young people engaging in opening conversations about sex and relationships with their parents and/or teachers. This theme is reflective of the broader sense of mistrust towards adults in the context of RSE, as explored in section 7.4b (p. 248). Secondly, judgement from peers appears is understood as a prominent and consequential threat for young women. Furthermore, as highlighted by Sasha and Lily, external perceptions can feel constraining

and deterministic – mirroring the 'stickiness' of sexual reputations (Tolman, 2012). Social acceptance, in the form of friendship and popularity with peers, is central within young people's understandings of status (Read et al, 2010). Feeling accepted is also identified as a key facet within young women's constructions of well-being, whereas feeling socially rejected is associated with stress and shame (Flacking et al, 2014). As such, it makes sense that Sasha and Lily feel concerned about what their peers' think about them. Further, young women's conceptualisations of social acceptance are found to rest on the performance of heterosexuality and femininity, thus producing a 'cultural rubric' (Bay-Cheng, 2015) against which they can be assessed. Research with young women highlights this 'rubric' rests on physical attractiveness, being perceived as 'nice', the appearance of authenticity, and increasingly, assertiveness (Read et al, 2011). Budgeon (2016, p.412) argues that those who fail to reflect legitimated modes of gender expression may risk occupying 'pariah femininity' status, and thus being socially ostracised. This further reflects the dichotomy of acceptable girlhood between 'Can Do' and 'At Risk' femininities established in section 2.5 (p. 31).

The threat of external judgement was also present in School B, whereby a fear of being undesirable emerged as a superordinate theme for Krista and Ruby:

> Krista: *'I feel like lots of people have expectations, and then 'Oh, you don't meet that'*
> *'this sounds bad, but let's say you just don't get married because no one likes you…'*
> Ruby: *'Being comfortable with your body?'*

Krista expresses a sense of letting others down by not meeting their expectations around appearance. Later in the conversation, she highlights the potential of being romantically undesirable later in life as a critique of the marital focus of Catholic RSE. It is interesting that she posits undesirability, over choice of other relationship models or singleness, as the central reason marital focused RSE may not be applicable to some. This potentially reflects

the social demand for young women in particular to present as desirable to others, as highlighted above – but also potentially links to the lack of coverage of non-marital relationships and singleness as valid options within Catholic RSE. Ruby cites 'being comfortable with your body' as a key topic she felt was missing from their current RSE delivery. As highlighted in section 6.3c (p. 193), it is worth acknowledging that Ruby and Krista approach this issue as young women of colour. Euro-centric beauty standards, racist stereotyping and misogynoir are found to intensify feelings of body-dissatisfaction and low self-esteem for racially minoritised women and girls (Lowy et al, 2021). Further, black women in particular are found to experience increased weight stigma and discrimination (Lowy et al, 2021). Lowy et al (2021) critique existing approaches to body image in adolescent girls for working under the assumption that such concerns only apply to white, middle class, thin girls – thus omitting the needs and experiences of girls of colour.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter has principally focused on the overarching pupil theme of 'fraught sexual landscapes'. Within this theme, several master themes were addressed, as listed in the table below.

Table 13: Summary of Composite Master Themes Relating to Sexual Landscapes

- Normalisation of sexual harassment and gender-based violence in public, in school and online.
- Advocacy for LGBTQ+ peers.
- Sex negativity and the fear of social, moral, and physical sexual consequences.
- Distancing from sexual desires and expression.
- Feeling unseen and misunderstood by male peers.
- Empathy for the impact of hegemonic masculinity on young men.
- Construction of gendered norms and expectations within RSE and beyond.
- The impact of sexual and relationship pressure.
- Fear of judgement from peers and adults.

The statutory RSE guidance (Department for Education, 2019, p. 26) states that '*All pupils should feel that the content is relevant to them and their developing sexuality'.* As such, the provision of good-quality RSE depends on a comprehensive and up-to-date understanding of

the ‘socio-sexual ecosystems’ surrounding young people’s experiences of relationships and sex (Setty, 2023, p. 4). As I will explore in section 7.2 (p. 214 onwards) the majority young women in the current study reported that this understanding often felt significantly lacking within their RSE provision. In contrast, this chapter aimed to address RQ 3 *Does RSE delivered in Catholic schools reflect and meet the current needs of young women in England*?’ by mapping the prevalent issues facing the participants within the realm of sexuality and gender. Further, this chapter sought offer as preliminary response to RQ 4 *How do the experiences of staff delivering RSE in Catholic schools collude or contrast with young women’s experiences?* by mapping points of unanimity and tension between pupil and teacher perspectives on socio-sexual issues.

Exploration of the master themes outlined in Table 14 above demonstrates that young women face fraught and complex sexual and gendered landscapes. VAWG and sexual harassment are simultaneously constructed as normalised aspects of young women’s social worlds, and as pressing threats that shape how they navigate both physical and online spaces. This colludes with the construction of VAWG as a central motivation for RSE delivery, as expressed by T1 and T3. The participants spoke confidently and sensitively gender and sexual diversity, and clearly articulated their own sexual ethics of LGBTQ+ allyship. They attributed this increased understanding to use of social media and increased representation of LGBTQ+ people in the media. This stands in tension with T1 and T2’s construction of LGBTQ+ identities as a key area for improvement within their RSE subject knowledge and delivery (section 5.7, pp. 169-170)

Many of the young women negative perceptions of sex, largely rooted imbedded fears of physical and social consequences associated with sexual behaviour. This speaks to the pervasive social construction of adolescent sexuality as ‘risky’, as explored in section 2.4 (p. 26 onwards). This rhetoric is echoed in T2 and T3’s emphasis on the ‘good’ decision making and awareness of consequences as central outcomes from RSE delivery (section 5.2, p. 144). Building on this, the majority of participants were keen to discursively distance themselves from sexual activity and desire and did so situating sex as something ‘other people’ do. In my view, this distancing from sexuality is compounded by the societal repression ‘discourses

of desire' for adolescent girls (Fine, 1992, p. 35) and, for some participants, may be intensified by the dismissal of sexual pleasure within Catholic sexual values.

The young women spoke of fractured gender-dynamics within their peer groups, owing to persistent feelings of being misunderstood and antagonised by boys, particularly surrounding menstruation. Some participants situated better education of men and boys as a key vehicle for tackling this experience. Notably, this theme echoes T2's reflections on her experiences with her male partner, as explored in section 5.2 (p. 141). At the same time, many participants expressed empathy and concern surrounding the impact of hegemonic masculine ideals on young men's emotional expression. Many of the participants experienced gender-segregated RSE during primary school, which I argue may have further contributed to the broader theme of gendered disconnect in their social spheres. Finally, all of the participants describe climates of societal and peer pressure surrounding sex and relationships, compounded by feelings being judged by others. This theme was notably unarticulated within the teacher's constructions of key priorities within RSE. In turn, this indicates a failure to adequately acknowledge and address gravity of sexual and gender norms within young peoples' lives.

Overall, this chapter provides a rich contextual foundation, upon which analysis of young women's experiences and perceptions of Catholic RSE can be built. In doing so, Chapter Six has laid the groundwork for the exploration of RQ 2 *What are young women's lived experiences of statutory RSE in Catholic schools?* and more substantive exploration of RQ 3 within the following chapter.

Chapter Seven: Young women's lived experiences of statutory RSE in Catholic secondary schools

'You always need to put religion aside' (Sasha)

7.1 Introduction

Building on Chapter Six, this chapter will explore the young women's lived experiences and perceptions of statutory RSE delivered from in Catholic schools. It will explore the four remaining overarching themes produced from the pupil focus groups. These, alongside their composite master themes, are displayed in the table below. A detailed breakdown of the development of these themes in relation to transcript quotations and superordinate themes can be seen in the corresponding sections of appendices K and L.

Table 14: Pupil Master Themes Relating to Overarching Themes 2-4

School A	School B
Overarching Theme 2: (dis)engagement in RSE	
Discomfort as barrier to learning	*RSE evoking confusion*
Disengagement in lessons	*Clarity as key to understanding*
Familiarity as key for comfort	*Taboo topics as key events*
Dissatisfied with lack of inclusivity	*Desire to see self in RSE content*
Frustration with teaching approach	*Feeling alienated within RSE*
RSE as valuable	*Frustration with tokenistic approach to LGBTQ+ relationships.*
School as Proactive	*Disengaged by repetitive content*
Content inappropriate for life-stage	*RSE as uncomfortable experience*
Experiences not reflected	*School as sex-negative space*
	Impact of Covid
Overarching Theme 3: Conflicted Relationship to Catholicism	
Rejection of Catholic ethos	*Catholicism as authoritative voice in life*
Catholicism as authoritative voice	*Catholicism as unrelatable*
Normalisation of Catholic values	*Forging own religious identity*
Life beyond school	*Catholic Sexual Values as unattainable*
	Imbedded Catholic sexual values in RSE
Overarching Theme 4: Relationship to Adults	
Mistrust of teacher intervention	*Distrust of adults as advisors*
Mistrust of family	*Trust in maternal advice*
Family as trusted source	*Not feeling seen or heard by adults*
Desire to learn from those with shared experiences	
Overarching Theme 5: Reliance on self-education	

Anxiety and loneliness of not knowing	*Feeling deprived of 'full picture' of sex and relationships information*
Desire to feel prepared	*Desire to feel safe and prepared*
Learning through experience	*Anxiety of not knowing*
Social media as learning tool	*Collective Story Telling*
Lack of reliable sources	*Desire for more robust approaches to sexual violence*
Feeling deprived of information	*Developing own information networks*
Reliance on own information networks	*Distancing self from reliance on social media*
Resilience	

Investigation of these themes will principally address RQ 2 *'What are young women's lived experiences of statutory RSE in Catholic schools?'* and RQ 3 *'Does RSE delivered in Catholic schools reflect and meet the current needs of young women in England?'.* This chapter also draws comparison between student and staff experiences (Chapter Five, p. 126) of Catholic RSE, providing substantive insight into RQ 4 '*How do the experiences of staff delivering RSE in Catholic schools collude or contrast with young women's experiences?'.* An emerging body of research has begun to address Catholic RSE in the UK and Ireland, particularly in the context of LGBTQ+ inclusion, most notably represented by Whittle and Henry (2024). Despite this, the specific gendered experiences of sex education in Catholic schools for young women, particularly in an English context, remain chronically underrepresented in education research. This chapter offers the only empirical investigation of this nature to date, offering a unique insight into seldom captured experiences of faith schooling. Furthermore, statutory RSE remains a relatively young area of education policy (Department of Education, 2019a), and as such, its impacts have yet to be fully explored within research. In turn, this chapter also offers a critically important appraisal of statutory RSE from a pupil perspective.

As with Chapters Five and Six, the structure of this chapter also follows Smith et al's (2009) advocated model of simultaneously presenting findings and discussion for IPA research. The chapter comprises four main sub-sections, each representing an overarching theme identified by synthesising experiential master themes from each of the pupil focus groups (see Table 9, p. 127). Each overarching sub-section is broken into composite master themes, which feature colour coded supportive quotes from participants (see Table 13, p. 178). Themes are then discussed with reference to relevant literature and policy.

7.2 (dis)engagement in RSE

This section explores master themes relating to (dis)engagement in RSE lessons. The participants' relationships to RSE lessons, across both school groups, were largely defined by a series of barriers to engagement. Adams Tucker et al (2016) argue that student engagement in sex education rests on the intersection of student-teacher relationships, teacher competence, and content relevance. This is significantly corroborated by the pupil-participants in the current study.

7.2a Frustration, disengagement, and confusion with approach and content

In School A, Saffi and Sasha expressed significant frustration with overarching staff approaches to RSE topics:

> Sasha: '*instead of telling you not to get it [social media], 'cuz people are gonna get it'*
>
> *'to get out of a toxic relationship, It's a lot harder than just calling Childline and then it's all sorted'*
>
> Saffi: '*Teachers just say it's like not a good idea to get it [social media] and you shouldn't get it. They don't really explain like, why.'*

Both girls highlight a prohibitive approach to social media, as upheld by staff, as unrealistic and lacking nuance. In the latter quotation from Sasha, she further emphasises a lack of complexity in the school approach to abusive relationships. Frustration with simplistic approaches to sex education content is similarly expressed by young people in Adams Tucker et al's (2016) study of student engagement in South African 'Life Orientation' classes. Adams Tucker and colleagues (2016) argue that defaulting to oversimplified explanations and narratives may be symptomatic of teacher discomfort in discussing challenging topics. This is substantiated by Dobson et al (2017), who argue that teacher discomfort can lead to

a shutting down of teacher-student communication, resulting in topic avoidance and defensiveness. Teacher discomfort can be shaped by numerous factors, which may relate to their own relationship to sexuality and relationships, or a lack of confidence and/or subject knowledge – as explored in section 5.3 (p. 149) (Francis, 2016). It may also be fuelled by normative assumptions surrounding the level of knowledge of certain topics we, as adults, feel is appropriate for children and young people. It is possible that both of these factors combined contributed to the lack of nuance within RSE observed by Sasha and Saffi. Both of their experiences speak to a discrete master theme of pupils feeling that the 'full picture' of sex and relationships is actively withheld from them within RSE, as explored in section 7.5a (i) (p. 254).

In School B, Krista highlighted disengagement as a result of what she felt to be inappropriate approaches to teaching on sexual violence:

> Krista: *'So it was like, it was in your face…it was not reassuring'*
> *'it can happen to anyone, but I don't think like personal experiences of like, stuff like that should be told.'*
> *'I don't think people took it as seriously as they should, because it was like, a one time thing.'*

Krista reflects on an assembly in which a teacher presented her own experience of sexual violence. For Krista, this intersection of the teacher's lived experience and RSE left her feeling shocked and disconcerted in an area where she desired reassurance from the adults around her. Krista further highlights that the one-off nature of this lesson resulted in her peers taking the issue 'less seriously'. Interestingly, Ruby also reflected remembering this lesson, but did not express the same degree of shock at the content. The assembly described represents a significant departure to the highly boundaried approach of 'never ask me a personal question' adopted by T2 (section 5.5, p. 164), Krista's primary RSE facilitator. This stark difference in approaches, and constructions of teacher-student

boundaries, may have contributed to Krista's discomfort. Whilst distress was likely not the intended effect, it is worth considering the impact of fear and discomfort within sex education.

As highlighted by Moore (2022), a *safe* space for sexual violence education might not be a *comfortable* one. For some educators, emotional responses to the unsettling nature of sexual violence are constructed as an intrinsic part of the learning process (Moore, 2022). However, those who advocated for this approach also emphasise the need to create space for student choice, set ground rules, and use content warnings in order to ensure discomfort can be utilised appropriately. One of Moore's (2002, p. 82) participants summarised this approach as '*I want people to be able to engage and feel that discomfort but not to the point where they can't do anything with it*'. This reflects a view of discomfort as part of achieving the 'learning edge', as argued by Francis (2016), which is also something T2 grappled with in her resistance to using content warnings in RSE lessons (section 5.3, p. 150). It is possible that the necessary framing tools and boundaries were absent from the assembly, thus breaching past the boundary of 'productive' discomfort for Krista. This becomes problematic considering that fear surrounding sex can prohibit young people from voicing concerns and asking necessary questions (Hunt, 2023). Hunt (2023, p. 470) found that 'scare tactics' and 'cautionary tale' approaches to sex education in the US resulted in some college students being afraid of sex and relationships into adulthood. Overall, Krista's experience speaks to a gap between her and the educator's conceptualisation of appropriate pedagogies for sexual violence education. This indicates a need for enhanced dialogue with students surrounding how they feel 'difficult' subjects should be approached, and what boundaries are needed for productive engagement.

For many, across both schools, disengagement was often hinged to repetitive content within lessons:

Nadia: *'like you've already talked about in the same lesson. So it's just kind of pointless to talk about it again'*

Mia: *'we get what it is. And we always say the same stuff over and over again'*

Krista: *' Periods and like sex are repetitive, but we also did masturbation and porn.'*

Ruby: *'It's very repetitive, so everyone just gets really bored just hearing about it'*

Chloe: *'they just like show the same video every year, it's so annoying'*

Nisha: *'some of them are a bit, like, repetitive? Like, you'd hear the same stuff again?'*

The pupils appear to construct repetition of topics as reducing their relevance, thus making them 'pointless' (Adams Tucker et al, 2016). Interestingly, repetition of key topics is understood as best practice within a 'spiral' curriculum approach to RSE, which is used to reinforce learning (Pound et al, 2017). Furthermore, Sell and Reiss (2022) found that pupils preferred a spiral RSE curriculum to more sporadic 'drop down day' approaches. Pound et al (2017) emphasise that within an effective spiral curriculum, pupils should still feel like they are progressing in each topic, to avoid the feeling of needless repetition. Without this, repeated messaging may be read as 'nagging' and further fuel dissonance, as expressed by young men in regard to consent education in Setty (2022). It is unclear from the Teacher interviews whether Schools A and B were intentionally seeking to adopt a spiral approach, but it is evident from the girls' accounts that without a clear sense of progression and purpose, repeated content may in fact hinder learning on key points rather than reinforce them.

Krista constructs some topics as more novel and thus more engaging than others (masturbation vs. periods). This alludes to a further master theme within School B of novel content being perceived as 'key events' within RSE:

Ruby: '*Did you watch that video of the woman, like, [hushed voice] giving birth?*'

Ada: '*With the, the ice cream smoothies or something?*'

Multiple Speakers: '*oh the tea! Yeah!*'

For Ruby, the birth video is recalled as a key memory of her RSE experience at primary school. As suggested in her hushed tone, the potentially taboo nature of this video contributes to it being more memorable than other moments. The latter two quotes offer insight into the use of what I deem 'novelty concept' resources in RSE. Ada attempts to describe a video she remembers watching in RSE, noting that it used ice cream and smoothies as a metaphor for *something* relating to relationships. However, notably, she struggles to remember the exact message of the video, demonstrating that the novelty concept overshone the video content itself. The final quote reflects a moment of collective recognition of the 'Consent is as easy as tea' video, a free video-resource which has been used prolifically across schools in the UK (Brady and Lowe, 2020). The resource explores affirmative consent through the metaphor of making someone a cup of tea (i.e. you wouldn't force someone to drink the tea if they became unconscious). The video has drawn some notable criticism for oversimplifying sexual consent, and for failing to explore the impact of coercion and structures of oppression on how consent is enacted (Brady and Lowe, 2020). However, for Nisha and Ruby, the clarity in messaging awarded by the simplistic nature of the resource was constructed as a key strength:

Nisha: '*I think it was alright. Because yeah, made sense. And it like made a point of giving consent in general*'

Ruby: '*it was pretty ,like ,basic so anyone could get it if they wanted to.*'

For some of the girls in School B, disengagement in the subject also appeared tied to an absence of clarity around where and how RSE was actually delivered, producing a master theme of 'RSE evoking confusion':

> Ruby: *'we did a bit in Biology? but I think that's only if you pick triple, I don't know.'*
>
> Krista: *'I can't remember the last big talk until like the year 9 one'*

Both of these quotes indicate places outside of RE lessons, where most of the content was situated for School B, where RSE 'happens' – biology lessons, and 'big talks', which I understood to refer to assemblies. This indicates cross curricula delivery of RSE, which is advocated for as part of a whole-school approach to sex education, a model that is increasingly considered best practice (Gilsenan and Sundaram, 2024). Notably, both Ruby and Krista struggle to recall the exact details of these occurrences of RSE, which constructs the subject as a diffuse and intangible entity within their school experience. A cross-curricula approach is argued to enhance consistent messaging across the school community, which is particularly useful when tackling systemic issues such as gender-based violence (Gilsenan and Sundaram, 2024). However, the confusion expressed by Krista and Ruby potentially indicates a need for more clarity in communicating how and where RSE topics will be addressed within school.

7.2b Impact of COVID-19

Notably, some confusion surrounding RSE may be attributed to COVID-19 disruption, which emerged as a discrete master theme for Krista and Ruby.

> Krista: '*in year 8 we did the year 7 things and then, well this year we did the year 8 things.'*
>
> Ruby: *'I don't remember anything in year 7.'*

As explored in section 3.2d (p. 61), the pandemic was a highly disruptive period for English schooling, resulting in significantly fragmented and inconsistent experiences of education (Timmins, 2021). All of the participants would have started secondary school in September 2019, meaning they only had seven months of uninterrupted, face-to-face schooling in Year 7, followed by significant disruption across Years 8 and 9. RSE was highly disrupted by the pandemic, not only due to the temporary postponement of the statutory policy roll out (Long, 2023), but also due to shift in prioritisation towards 'core' subjects (Horan et al, 2023). Notably, all three teachers described attempts to adapt RSE to meet pupils' changing needs throughout the pandemic (section 5.3, p. 146), but this doesn't appear to be reflected within the pupils' memories of that time. It is unclear whether Ruby's lack of memory of RSE in Year 7 is due to an absence of subject delivery, or due to an understandable lack of clarity about what content happened when, due to the high level of disruption to her education over the past two years. As emphasised by all three staff participants, the pandemic gave rise to monumental changes in young peoples' social worlds (section 5.3, p.145). As such, it is very possible that those changes overshadowed engagement with RSE delivery. Krista's quotation highlights the implementation of a 'catch up' approach to RSE, in which they covered the previous year's content. This further contributes to a sense of mismatch between the developmental and experiential needs of pupils, and the RSE content provided to them. This gap is explored in detail in section 7.2d (p. 222).

7.2c Dissatisfied with lack of inclusivity and tokenistic approach to LGBTQ+ identities

Across both schools, participants expressed feeling dissatisfied with the insufficient inclusion of LGBTQ+ identities within their RSE provision:

Lily: '*We had one lesson on it, it was literally like 15 minutes about it*'

Mia: '*We just did like, definitions*'

'I guess it's harder for gay people to be in a relationship like publicly.'

Nisha: '*we could add more about like, obviously, like, different genders because we do do a lot of LGBTQ stuff, but then, we don't do much about it in like the sexual education*'

Ada: '*I think there were occasional mentions of like, a relationship where it was two women, but like, the sex stuff…*'

'It's like 'so this is what a bisexual person is'

Krista: '*It's only during Pride Month, not throughout the whole year.*'

Lily and Mia highlight that whilst LGBTQ+ identities were covered within School A, the lessons focused largely on 'definitions' of different sexualities and genders. Mia also discussed her feeling that LGBTQ+ pupils would likely find it harder to be openly in a relationship within school. This reflects concerns highlighted by T1 surrounding the persistent prejudice faced by queer students within School A (section 5.7, p. 169). This is indicative of a greater need for LGBTQ+ inclusion that stretches beyond defining terms for different identities. Interestingly, Nisha highlights that much of the coverage of LGBTQ+ identities in School B sits outside of RSE, and as emphasised by Krista, this provision only exists within Pride month. The 'location' of LGBTQ+ coverage in School B was gleaned from T2, who described Pride content as primarily delivered by tutors during form-time. The situation of LGBTQ+ identities outside of RSE, which in both schools was located within RE provision, reflects the pastoral approach adopted across many Catholic schools (Whittle and Henry, 2024). By situating LGBTQ+ identity as a pastoral issue, Catholic schools are able to offer support whilst avoiding 'tricky' parts of scripture and theological sexual ethics. However, Whittle and Henry (2024) argue this approach becomes problematic in that it situates LGBTQ+ students within discourse of victimhood, aligning the school approach to inclusion with that of mental health problems or grief. For Ada, the only 'out' queer participant, the limited approach to inclusion appeared as tokenistic. She highlights how

mentions of same sex relationships for women were fleeting and failed to include 'the sex stuff', and again, where LGBTQ+ identities were covered, this was often in a 'definitions' type framework. This speaks to a broader theme of Ada feeling alienated from the heteronormative focus of their RSE classes, as addressed in the next section.

7.2d Desire to see self in RSE and content inappropriate for life-stage

For some of the young women, disengagement in RSE was strongly rooted in the unmet desire for accurate representation of young people's identities and experiences. In School A, all participants reflected feeling the RSE received was not matched to their life-stage and experience. This produced a master theme of 'content inappropriate for life-stage':

> Sasha: *'It's like, 'Why didn't you tell me that three years ago?'*
> *'I don't think you're like aware of it. Like, throughout year seven, that's when you're going to get like snapchat, Instagram and that. They don't really talk to you about that.'*
> Ella: *'You wouldn't really care about stuff that you would now'*
> *'as years go by, it should like raise, like with your maturity.'*
> Lily: *'if you learn it in year seven, you're more educated as the years go by.'*
> Saffi: *'So you've not just learned about something, like, now, when it could've been like normalised.'*

The participants describe RSE content that feels pitched at those younger and with less life experience than themselves. This substantiates the findings of the 2021 Ofsted report on sexual harassment in schools, and King-Hill's (2024) work which found that young people perpetually found RSE to be delivered 'too little, too late'. This is a critically important finding considering assertions from right wing politicians, as exemplified by Miriam Cates and the New Social Covenant Unit's report (2023, p.22), that RSE is 'age inappropriate' and

exposes children to 'sexualising material'. This perspective strongly underpins the proposed changes to statutory RSE guidance (Department for Education, 2024a), as explored in section 3.2e (p. 62). The proposals include the removal of any RSE for children below the age of nine, and the delay of 'explicit' topics (including contraception and domestic violence) until students are in Year 9, the age of the participants in the current study (Department for Education, 2024b). The proposed changes stand in direct tension with the girls' experiences outlined above and would mean *even further* delays to content they felt should have been delivered much earlier in their schooling. As Sasha highlights, there is already resistance from adults to provide necessary safety information at its point of relevance, in this instance – when young people first get social media. The experiences of young people themselves appear glaringly absent from the proposed changes to RSE. Whilst young people were invited to respond to the consultation (Department for Education, 2024a), it is likely that the prominent issues surrounding the government's approach to youth consultancy approach, as highlighted in the context of the 2019 consultation in section 3.2f (p. 65) persist. As such, if actioned in its current form by the new Labour government, the 2024 draft guidance risks further damaging the relevance and impact of RSE in English schools. At the time of writing, the new government are yet to respond to pressures to abandon the proposed changes (Whittaker, 2024).

Ella, Lily, and Saffi emphasise a desire for RSE content that builds in accordance with their age and development. Notably, practitioners and policy makers may argue that this is already happening with the use 'spiral' curricula section 7.2a, p. 217) and the staggered approach of the statutory guidance content (Department for Education, 2019a; 2024). However, the participant perceptions clearly demonstrate that such progression within RSE is not visible to them. Attempts to build upon existing learning may in fact contribute to the heightened problematisation of repetitive content outlined in section 7.2a (p. 217). Further, the participants may not perceive the intended development as much of the content is poorly matched to their developmental and experiential needs, as emphasised across the quotations above. This finding reflects a pervasive failure to reflect the actual needs and experiences of young people within RSE. This speaks to systemic avoidance of meeting young people *where they are,* and not where we, as adults, want them to be. Again, it is

likely that this failure is tied to a societal unwillingness to perceive children and young people as potentially sexual beings (Jones, 2011).

A further master theme of 'experiences not reflected' emerged for Mia, Saffi and Nadia:

> Mia: *'the teachers like haven't grown up where there's a load of sexualities'*
>
> Saffi: *'I think I'd do about our age relationships'*
>
> Nadia: *'some people have a boyfriend and girlfriend, but they don't talk about that as much as marriage or divorce'*

Mia reflects on the difference in visibility of LGBTQ+ identities for current generations and her teachers' generations. This account largely substantiates the fear of being 'out of touch' with current sexual cultures expressed by T1 (section 5.7, p. 169) and found by Cumper et al (2023). This indicates a notable gulf between the evolving knowledge and experiences of young people in relation to sexual and gender identity, and RSE provision. As highlighted by T2 and T3, LGBTQ+ inclusion remains a persistent 'area for improvement' within RSE (section 5.7, pp. 171-172). In turn, both schools appeared to struggle with 'keeping up' with young people's needs in terms of inclusivity. For Saffi and Nadia, this theme centres on the lack of relatable relationship models within RSE for people their age, owing to a predominant focus on marriage. As Nadia emphasises, her peers are engaged in romantic relationships, yet this is seldom reflected within their RSE lessons. The marital focus of School A's RSE content reflects the construction of marriage as the 'foundation of society' within the CES' (2019, p. 7) model secondary RSE curriculum. Based on Nadia and Saffi's experiences, the dominant focus on Catholic relationship ideals can be seen to compromised space awarded to young peoples' *current* relational needs within School A's RSE provision.

In School B, a master theme of 'desire to see self in RSE content' emerged, however, unlike in the school A, this desire stretched beyond the misrepresentation of their age group:

> Krista: *'They talk about the outcome, marriage and kids, that's it.'*
> *'more on like a healthy relationship but not from a Catholic point of view'*
> Chloe: *'like, that's not relatable because no one here is married'*
> Ada: *'they showed us some weird video from the 80s about like, wearing deodorant.'*

Krista, Chloe and Ada all emphasise issues surrounding the *relevance* of RSE content that does not reflect their lived experiences. This echoes Coll et al's (2018) finding that lack of relevance to lived experience contributed to significant feelings of disconnect from RSE for young people in Ireland. In particular, Chloe and Krista problematise the marital focus of the Ten:Ten resources, in which marriage is treated as the healthy relationship ideal. While T2 does not address relatability specifically, she too critiqued the 'one dimensional' nature of the resources and argued that often the focus was 'a bit too Catholic' (section 5.7, p. 174). As such, there seems to be shared recognition that the Ten:Ten resources do not necessarily reflect the lived realities of pupils. Notably, the Ten:Ten resources may not be the only restricting factor in this instance, as the 'nature and importance of marriage' is continuously emphasised in the CES model RSE curriculum (2019, p.8) for KS3 to KS5. Further, it is highlighted that all sexual activity should be postponed until after marriage (CES, 2019). For Krista, this focus centres the 'outcome', yet not the process – which comprises young people's navigation of personal relationships and sexuality prior to marriage. As argued by Chloe, the relationship narratives offered within RSE therefore lack transferability to her peer group's present lived experiences. Overall, young people's actual lived experiences and perceptions of relationships constitute a missing narrative within School B's RSE delivery.

The absence of representations of sexuality and relationships that feel true to young people's own experiences appears to contribute to a further theme of feeling alienated from RSE content:

> Ada: *'It's often quite focused only on like heterosexual people. So often, it's kind of pointless for me listening to some of the stuff in it.'*
> *' he does, like, these sexualities that even I've never heard of and it's sort of like a little bit weird and it means often lot of straight people think it's like really weird and there's so much stuff to remember when, it's sort of overcomplicated.'*
> *'But then again, I don't want sort of, I understand that. It's, it's a minority of people, you know, so.'*
> Ruby: *'like videos, it can help other people like listening to it. But for other people that's not very good form of like actually learning, so it could be a bit more well rounded for everyone.'*

Ruby highlights a sense of alienation from the resources premised on the singular form of learning it facilitates. As she argues, engagement with videos may not be accessible or engaging for all students. It is unclear if she includes herself within this group, but she identifies a key limitation of use of video as a sole resource format. Ada's experience appears to be shaped by RSE that assumes heterosexuality as the default position of students (Abbott, Ellis and Abbott, 2015). Troublingly, Ada appears to accord with this discourse in positioning herself as part of 'a minority of people'.

The coverage of sexual identities within the Ten:Ten resource reflects a what I deem an *awareness* approach, whereby it focuses on listing different identity labels. This approach offers only surface level inclusion, focusing on identities but not the relationships, desires or needs of these groups (Abbott, Ellis and Abbott, 2015). Notably, Abbott, Ellis and Abbott (2015) critique approaches to LGBTQ+ inclusivity that centre solely on preventing

homophobia and intolerance as this can reinforce a construction of queerness as 'other'. Further, they critique the dominance of pastoral approaches – highlighting pupils 'concerns' around their sexuality and need for support – as further eschewing a full picture of LGBTQ+ identities from the classroom (Abbott, Ellis and Abbott, 2015). This echoes Whittle and Henry's (2024) criticism of the reliance on pastoral inclusivity within Catholic schools, and the subsequent disempowering rhetoric of queer victimhood. Whilst this criticism holds weight, approaches that address homophobia and intolerance at least appear to move beyond the surface level approach described by Ada – even if not sufficiently. It is possible that conversations around intolerance were situated outside of School B's main RSE provision, delivered through the Ten:Ten resources, within the 'Pride' content T2 described as occurring within form time. However, this separation may in fact reinforce a rhetoric of LGBTQ+ identities as other, through constituting queer relationships as 'inappropriate' for the RSE classroom (Abbott, Ellis and Abbott, 2015). Furthermore, resulting disengagement from RSE is associated with poor sexual literacy and efficacy, and can increase dependency on 'self-taught' RSE through online resources and pornography, or dependency on information from peers and partners which may be unreliable (Epps, Markowski and Cleaver, 2023). Reliance on self-education is substantively explored in section 7.5b (ii) (p. 262).

Ada's experience offers a notable point of tension to T3's construction of School B as 'more liberal' than other Catholic schools (section 5.4, p. 158). Both Teachers Two and Three emphasised their position as LGBTQ+ allies, and T3 was keen to highlight the school's overarching approach to ensuring RSE 'is for everyone' (section 5.4, p. 158). However, good intentions do not necessarily equate to inclusive RSE. Abbot, Elliss and Abbott (2015) found that the majority of teachers felt they were upholding sexual inclusivity within the classroom, yet failed to engage with the ways in which sex education delivery can produce and maintain heteronormativity – as outlined in the previous paragraph.

The Catholic context of Ada's experience can also not be ignored. T3 strongly emphasised that it was time availability, not Catholicism, that had previously hindered their inclusion of LGBTQ+ content (section 5.5, p. 158). In doing so, he constructs Catholic schooling and LGBTQ+ inclusion as compatible entities. As explored in Chapter Five, this position reflects

an avoidance of 'thorny' areas of Magisterium doctrine, which condemn same-sex relationships (Whittle and Henry, 2024). Whilst this teaching was not explicitly upheld, and 'Pride' content did feature within the RSE discussed by pupils and staff at School B, it must be acknowledged that Catholic teachings on marriage as an intrinsically heterosexual were being delivered simultaneously. I find this to be a largely irreconcilable contradiction. In my view, the dissonance between the narrative of LGBTQ+ acceptance and Catholic sexual ethics produces an implicit narrative of '*love the sinner, hate the sin*'. As Wareham (2024) emphasises, such discourses may still produce significant feelings of shame for LGBTQ+ youth. This is not to say faith and sexual diversity necessarily cannot co-exist. Henry (2024, p. 28)) offers a potentially transformative model for 'queer thriving' in Catholic schools, premised on the integration of queer theologies and increased focus on 'relationality at the heart' of Catholic education. However, whilst I find the attempt to grapple with the oppositionality of Catholicism and queerness admirable, I struggle to conceive of this approach as realistic in the current moment given the staunch lack of substantive theological change in the Church's stance on LGBTQ+ relationships (section 3.3d (i), p. 76).

Overall, this theme clearly demonstrates that the participants understand relevance and relatability as important contingent factors for engaging, useful RSE. Despite this, the RSE provided to them continuously appears to misrepresent the priorities and needs of their age group, and in turn, is of limited use to the pupils it aims to support.

7.2e (dis)comfort in lessons

An overarching theme of discomfort in relation to RSE emerged across both groups. In School A, this produced a master theme of 'discomfort as a barrier to learning', and in School B, a theme of 'RSE as uncomfortable experience':

Saffi: 'it's not easy…*you've got to talk about like, stuff that you don't usually talk about.'*

'It's almost kind of awkward.'

Lily: '*I would say it'd be awkward, talking about it. You know, with this tension like.'*

Ada: *'it's sort of important to be a little bit uncomfortable, because it means that you're talking about things that you wouldn't usually talk about.'*

Nisha: *'you can find some stuff uncomfortable because you wouldn't talk about it every day. But then I feel like it is helpful'*

'being like all together with your friends and stuff, you're obviously going to joke about it'

Krista: '*they just feel better to just laugh about it.'*

'I feel like it's your friends reactions that might make you, like, start laughing'

Feelings of discomfort are well-identified responses to sex education content, for students and staff alike (Allen, 2014; Coll et al, 2018). Notably a divide emerged in participant interpretations of discomfort between schools A and B, between the construction of 'awkwardness' reflected by Saffi and Lily, and perception of discomfort as indicative of progress, as highlighted by Ada and Nisha. The latter position substantiates the findings of Coll et al (2018) and Francis (2016) who highlight that discomfort is not necessarily a sign of teaching gone awry, but rather a necessary part of learning new, and potentially challenging, information. However, while Saffi acknowledges some discomfort is tied to the novel nature of the topic, the overall feeling of awkwardness and tension portrayed by Saffi and Lily potentially warrants more investigation. King-Hill (2024) finds that awkwardness around sex within RSE can proliferate messages of sex being something shameful and embarrassing, and in turn, preclude meaningful student engagement.

Nisha and Krista explore laughter and humour as ways of mitigating discomfort during RSE lessons. Both girls construct laughter as an inevitable response to being with friends during RSE lessons, similar to Ada's construction of humour as the primary vehicle for discussions about sex with her friend group (section 6.3c, p. 191). This perspective is shared by T2, however, she also constructed laughter and 'over the top' responses as something to be

curtailed before meaningful learning could take place (section 5.3, p. 148). However, the consequences of eschewing such responses, that students such as Nisha and Krista conceive as natural, ought to be investigated. Strict sanctioning of expressions of humour within RSE can curtail student willingness to engage and cause feelings of resentment towards the facilitator (Dobson et al, 2017). Further, students may be wary of using certain terminology and asking necessary questions for fear of being reprimanded for inappropriate language (Dobson et al, 2017). It must also be acknowledged that creating space for humour whilst maintaining the classroom as a safe space is not easily surmountable for educators. Dobson et al (2017) also highlight that some students' engagement in RSE, particularly young women, is contingent on how well they perceive they facilitator to manage misbehaviour and classroom disruption from other students. Pound et al (2017) found that some girls reported being verbally harassed by boys when they attempted to participate in class discussions. In this context, inappropriate behaviours may create an intimidating environment and prevent other students from participating. As such, educators must navigate a careful balance allowing humour to be used as a learning tool for students such as Krista and Nisha, but also ensuring comfort and participation for all students.

In School A, the familiarity with those around them during RSE was identified by some as a key mitigating factor for discomfort:

> Mia: *'if you've had your teacher for, like, two years you'd speak to them.'*
>
> Ella: '*It depends how close you are.'*
>
> *'I'll go to Miss [Teaching Two] [laughter] but other teachers I can't'*
>
> Saffi: '*you have to sit next to someone like you don't know. And then you have to talk about that'*
>
> *'Form tutor…because you've known them for longer, so yeah'*

All three girls express a preference for teachers with whom they already had established relationships, such as form tutors, when seeking information about sex and relationships. Interestingly, this finding contradicts that of Pound et al (2017), who found that young people

were *more* uncomfortable when sex education was delivered by teachers they had long-standing relationships with, and felt this dynamic might compromise confidentiality and blur boundaries going forward. In turn, Pound et al (2017) recommend collaboration with specialist third-sector facilitators or peer-educators. However, for Mia, Ella and Saffi, the foundation of trust enabled by a longer-term relationship with their teacher was constructed as an important contingent factor for information seeking. Interestingly, Pound et al (2017) found that rejection of existing teachers as sex education facilitators was more common for older adolescents, so it is possible the participants preferences may change as they age. Arguably, however, student perceptions of trustworthy facilitators may be hinged more so to traits and behaviours, than profession and/or role. Adams Tucker et al (2016) found that students' understandings of trustworthy Life Orientation drew on the perception of mutual respect and dignity, a friendly demeanour, consistency between behaviour and values promoted in the class, and sensitivity towards young people's experiences. Further, Ella and Saffi highlight how 'closeness' to friends and/or peers can significantly affect engagement and enjoyment during RSE lessons. For Saffi, sitting next to someone unfamiliar further compounds a sense of discomfort in discussing sex and relationships. Overall, this theme indicates a need for further exploration of the relational aspects of RSE, and how variations in conceptions of 'trusted' adults may affect engagement and feelings of safety within the classroom.

7.2f RSE as valuable and pro-active

Despite the prevalence of points of disengagement in RSE, some participants in School A also recognised the importance of the lessons and were keen to emphasise the overall value of the school's efforts. This produced two master themes: 'school as proactive' and 'RSE as valuable'. These themes support evidence that demonstrates that, despite significant issues in content and approach, young people still *want* and appreciate school-based sex and relationships education (Renold et al, 2023; Sex Education Forum; 2024). Saffi and Sasha's perception of the school as proactive centred around the feeling that topics they wished to be included in RSE were already covered, and a sense that sexual harassment had reduced as a result of the schools interventions:

Saffi: 'the kind of time we're living in so there's loads of different pronouns. So I think it's good we started learning them'

'they're already doing stuff like sexism really?'

Sasha: 'people have been less calling other girls stuff.'

Sasha and Saffi's experiences are important; School A's RSE is constructed as meeting their needs (in some areas) and evoking tangible change within their school experience with regard to sexual harassment. Interestingly, within Saffi's experience, School A is perceived as keeping up with contemporary sexual cultures by including coverage of gender diversity, which notably was an area T1 felt that herself and the school were underperforming in (section 5.7, p. 169). Notably, however, at demonstrated in section 7.2c (p. 220), other pupil participants felt that there was space for considerable improvement in the RSE coverage and in-school experiences for LGBTQ+ youth within School A.

The theme of RSE as valuable, expressed by Mia and Lily in School A, and Nisha in School B centred around the experience of novel topics and an overarching view of conversations about sex and relationships as important:

Mia: 'but there's some things you just like, didn't know before.'

Lily: 'It's important to talk about the things talked about though.'

Nisha: 'I feel like it does help, like what they tell you at school? 'Cuz it just helps your decisions on what you want to do.'

Interestingly, Mia situates RSE as meaningful as it offers some new knowledge. This is important considering the prevalent pupil critique of repetitive and 'too-late' content across both schools' RSE delivery (section 7.2d, p.222). Despite this overarching backdrop, Mia still experiences moments of meaningful learning within her experience of RSE. Lily and Nisha

reflect more broadly on the value of discussing the topics covered within RSE, and the role of this learning in shaping real-world experiences and decision making. Whilst this overarching theme is less prevalent than others, it is important to note moments in which the teachers' desires to make a difference in pupils' lives through RSE materialise. Even in the face of significant barriers, highlighted by students and staff alike, RSE delivered in Catholic contexts is still, overall, considered to be valuable and of use for some of the young women.

7.3 Conflicted Relationship to Catholicism

7.3a Catholicism as authoritative voice

This section explores an overarching theme of 'Conflicted Relationship Catholicism' that emerged for both school groups. All of the participants expressed varied and, at times, complex relationships to Catholicism. Whilst Catholic education was broadly understood to be distinct to other forms of education, Catholicism was also understood by many as a normalised aspect of their schooling, particularly for those who had never attended a non-Catholic school. For Saffi and Ella in School A, this produced a master theme of 'normalisation of Catholicism':

> Saffi: '*I've only been to a Catholic school.*'
> '*Not really sure what they do in like, normal, schools. Well, not normal, non-Catholic schools*'
> Ella: '*It's just one of the things.*'

Further, a master theme of 'Catholicism as authoritative voice' emerged for participants in School A, within which they identified Catholic values as the defining ethos of the school, and subsequently their experience of RSE. This accords with T1's positioning of gospel and Catholic scripture as at the heart of School A's approach to RSE (section 5.4, p. 154).

Lily: '*there's like different religions in other schools, but in this school you've mainly got Catholic.'*

Sasha: '*Like being gay is like seen as a sin in religion. So it's like almost choosing between, like, morals and religion…You can't really push that.'*

'they were talking about how like, when a baby's like, conceived? Like, has a life and a soul, and a spirit and stuff like that'

Saffi: '*They say their side but like, yeah, they let other people think about it sometimes'*

Lily contrasts a perceived plurality of religious perspectives in other schools with the predominantly Catholic ethos of School A. It is somewhat unclear whether she refers to the faith identities of the school community, or the representation of different faiths within the school curriculum. In part, her observation reflects the intended purpose of Catholic schooling to put '*the teachings of the Catholic Church at the centre of the educational enterprise'* (CES, 2014, p.2). Increasingly, however, Catholic schools do not solely serve Catholic communities, and the Catholic Education Service (2023) argues that Catholic schools are in fact some of the most racially and culturally diverse in the UK. As highlighted in section 3.3c (p. 75), around 40% of the staff and pupils across English Catholic schools are not Catholic, and largely identify as other Christian denominations or Muslim (CES, *FAQs,* n.d.). This, however, does not necessarily reflect the demographic make-up of School A in particular. To Lily, the absence of faith-diversity is a defining characteristic of the schools. In terms of a diversity of faith-perspective within school content, has been noted that faith-schools often fail to adequately address other faith perspectives within RE, despite largely performing exceptionally well within their own faith (Phillips et al, 2023). In England, faith schools are required to dedicate 25% of RE GSCE teaching to a second religion. The Catholic Education Service (CES) argue that in Catholic schools, this usually amounts to one half term per year of teaching on other faiths, as Catholic schools have more dedicated time for RE (10% of total curriculum) (Catholic Education Service, *Religious Education in Catholic*

Schools. n.d). As such, diversity of faiths is rarely reflected within Catholic RE provision, which may further compound Lily's observation of a singular religious perspective.

Sasha highlights the imbedded nature of the Catholic view of life as beginning at conception within their RE provision, and the subsequent presentation of this as factual information. More interestingly, in reference to the challenge of teaching LGBTQ+ relationships from a Catholic perspective, she constructs Catholic sexual values as a hard-line, which pupils and teachers alike cannot 'push'. This suggests an understanding of Catholic views on sexuality, not as something that can be negotiated around, but as a static thing that must be fully embraced or rejected. This is also reflected as point of personal tension for T1, who constructs the Catholic admonition of gay marriage as 'a difficult line' (section 5.4, p. 155). For both, the Catholic stance on LGBTQ+ relationships is constructed as a significant obstacle; for Sasha, it represents a barrier to upholding 'morals', and for T1, it furthers a perceived gap in School A's ability to deliver inclusive RSE (section 5.7, p. 169). This signifies a potential rejection of the approach utilised by many Catholic schools, as highlighted by Whittle and Henry (2024), in which challenging scripture on homosexuality is avoided and LGBTQ+ identities 'accepted' through pastoral frameworks. For both, Catholic sexual ethics and inclusive RSE appear as opposing concepts. This view is substantiated by the prevailing stasis of official church stances on gender and sexuality (Henry, 2024; Ruether, 2000). As explored in section 7.2d (p. 228) not all share the view of Catholicism and queer inclusion as necessarily incompatible, and research has begun to envision an educational space in which both entities can thrive (Henry, 2024). Yet, in Sasha's experience, such possibilities are not yet visible. Building on Sasha's reflections, Saffi also appears to construct the Catholic voice of the school as dominant and difficult to challenge. She describes a didactic upholding of Catholicism from teachers, within which pupils' opportunities to 'think about it' are sporadically provided.

Notably, some of the pupils at School B expressed closer relationships to Catholicism than the School A group, with more participants explicitly identifying as Catholic, or coming from Catholic families. In this context, for Nisha and Ruby, a master theme of 'Catholicism as authoritative voice in life' emerged, demonstrating the prominent of role of Catholicism within their school experience and beyond:

Ruby: *'Obviously, it is from a Catholic perspective'*

Nisha: *'Well, for me, my parents are Catholic anyway. So it doesn't really change.'*

'we have heard like, probably since young, like, don't have sex until marriage'

Ruby constructs the delivery of RSE from a Catholic perspective as an inevitability within School B. Given T3's clear construction of a distinctly Catholic ethos throughout the school and the adoption of Ten:Ten resources, (section 5.4, p. 154), Ruby's observation makes sense. For Nisha, the content of RSE delivered from a distinctly Catholic perspective remains consistent with the messages surrounding sex and relationship she receives from her family. She highlights waiting until marriage, a key tenet of Catholic sexual ethics (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2019), as a deeply familiar sexual narrative, offered since childhood. This echoes Vraney's (1981) finding that messages surrounding chaste femininity can begin extremely early in childhood for Catholic young women. As explored in section 3.3d (i) (p. 76), such messaging can have profound and long-lasting effects on women's sexual wellbeing into adulthood due the reinforcement of shame surrounding sexual pleasure, regardless of whether they wait until marriage or not (Ogden, 2008; Mahoney, 2008).

For Ada, Krista and Chloe, Catholic sexual values were extremely prominent within what they considered to the main messages of their RSE provision, producing a master theme of 'imbedded Catholic sexual values in RSE':

Ada: 'they had like, a lot of stuff about like, the Catholic view of how you should do contraception.'

'the main point of contraception was like celibacy though'

Krista: '*it should not be, like, something about pleasure. It should be something about bringing new life'*

Chloe: '*Like, even after marriage, you should, erm, wait until you actually want a child.'*

Ada describes how conversations around contraception in School B were orientated to the 'the Catholic view', which primarily entailed abstinence. As highlighted in section 3.3d (p. 76), Catholic sexual ethics necessitate that all sexual acts remain 'open to life giving potential' (Bailey and Wilmott, 2022). As such, all 'artificial' methods of contraception, such as condoms or the pill, are prohibited. Notably, both Ten:Ten (2022) and the CES (2019) highlight that 'artificial' methods should be covered within RSE, although as Ada observes, this is principally framed as a point of comparison for the Catholic perspective. In the case of Ten:Ten, this results in a substantial focus on Natural Family Planning (NFP) as the only form of permittable contraception (Bailey and Wilmott, 2022). This reflects the Church's more permissive approach to marital sexuality adopted in the mid-20th century (Ruether, 2000). As all forms of permissible sex are contingent on marriage within Catholic sexual ethics (CES, 2019; Ten:Ten, 2022), Catholic RSE therefore constructs celibacy as the only morally authorised mode of sexuality available to young people. In turn, Ada perceives celibacy to be 'the main point' of the Ten:Ten lessons on contraception. Interestingly, School A appeared to not cover contraception at all, instead only signposting to health services to provide information, thus resulting in a notable point of professional anxiety for T1 (section 5.4, p. 155).

While neither school's approach to contraception appears quite as alarmist as that adopted by more conservative Catholic resources, such as A Fertile Heart (section 3.3d (ii), p. 78), I have concerns about the limited possibility for balance. The DfE (2019a, p.12) stipulate that

faith schools may offer 'balance debate' on 'contentious' issues within RSE, which contraception may well fall under within Catholic contexts. Taking this requirement at face value, the possibility of true discursive balance appears wholly diminished by the introduction of moral and theological permissibility. In constructing celibacy and/or NFP as the *only* forms of contraception ordained by the Catholic church, it is arguable that schools offer a choice – not between different forms of contraception – but between adherence or moral failure. It is therefore my view that the approach adopted by Ten:Ten and the CES may result in failure to facilitate necessary learning goods within RSE. In essence, this position seconds Wareham's (2022) critique of the 'faith-based carve outs' enabled by the 2019 guidance.

Krista and Chloe reflect on the procreative focus of sex within their RSE provision. In both reflections, pleasure is constructed as an insufficient motivation for sexual behaviour, even after marriage. This reflects the Ruether's (2000, p. 46) critique of the failure of Catholic theology to recognise 'the goodness of sexual pleasure for its own sake'. Further, Chloe's reflection echoes the historical mandate for married Catholic couples to suppress sexual desire before and after having children (Ruether, 2000). Interestingly, a Ten:Ten blog highlights 'desiring intimate pleasure' as a valid motivation for sex between a married couple and emphasise the role of NFP in enabling sex for pleasure to be part of Catholic marital life (Bailey and Wilmott, 2022). However, considering Krista and Chloe's experience of Ten:Ten lessons, the permissibility of sexual pleasure within Catholicism may have been lost in translation. Whilst it is unclear exactly *where* in their RSE provision Krista and Chloe perceived these messages around sex, it is arguable that their reflections are indicative of a gap between RSE curricula design and intent, and its actual implementation. As demonstrated in Chapter Five (sections 5.2, p. 141; 5.5, p. 162), the delivery of RSE content is highly contingent on the personal experiences, confidence levels, subject knowledge, and values of teaching staff. With this in mind, the intended messages of externally produced RSE resources may not always be communicated. Alternatively, it is also possible that Ten:Ten present different messages surrounding sexual pleasure within the KS3 resources to those included in the blog post. While it has not been possible to explore the specific sexual discourses represented within Ten:Ten resources within this study, principally due to the paywall, this presents a potentially fruitful area for future study.

Overall, the participants' constructions Catholicism as an authoritative and dominant voice within their experiences clearly demonstrate faith as a pivotal shaping factor across both schools' implementation of statutory RSE. Notably, this represents an interpretation of RSE far from the 'objective, critical and pluralistic' model increasingly adopted across Europe, and more recently, Wales (Dojan and Others v. Germany, 2011; Wareham, 2022).

7.3b Rejection of Catholic ethos and forging own religious identity

Whilst for the majority of participants Catholicism was understood as a normalised aspect of their school, and thus RSE experiences, participants across both groups were keen to distance themselves from conservative Catholic values. In School A, this emerged as two master themes: 'rejection of Catholic ethos' and 'life beyond school'. The former theme is demonstrated below:

> Saffi: *'like, what Catholics think about this kind of thing.'*
> Sasha: *'I think you always need to put religion aside. Get an atheist teacher, so that person is not biased'*
> *'There's going to be gay people, there's going to be trans people. Yeah, you just have to put it aside'*
> Nadia: *'like she can't like express that, I don't think, because people feel uncomfortable.'*
> Mia: *'We do that in RE, I don't know why'*

Saffi can be seen to separate herself from Catholicism through situating 'Catholics' as other. Whilst she did not reveal her religious identity during the focus group, this demonstrates a clear distinction between self and institutional Catholicism. For Sasha, the intersection of Catholicism and RSE is constructed as deeply inappropriate. Religion in this case is understood as something that must be 'put aside' in order to provide non-biased RSE.

Notably, this position contrasts Sell and Reiss' (2022) finding that the majority of both non-religious and religious pupils wanted to see more exploration of religious perspectives within RSE. Sasha returns to her construction of religion and morality as mutually exclusive concepts. Morality, for Sasha, encapsulates inclusion and acceptance of diverse expressions of gender and sexuality – something she cannot reconcile with the Catholic values upheld within her school (section 7.3a, p. 234). The perception of the intersection of Catholic belief and RSE as inappropriate is further expressed by Nadia, who reflects on a teacher expressing agreement with the Catholic prohibition of same-sex marriage. This reflects a desire for more objective approaches to RSE. Sasha proposes employing atheist teachers as a means to achieve a more objective form of RSE. Interestingly, this view potentially attributes more autonomy over RSE content to individual staff than is actually the case. Given the role of the CES in providing model curricula (2019) and monitoring Catholic schools, it is likely that an atheist teacher would not substantively affect the key messages offers within RSE at School A. Further, the delivery of RSE content within RE, as highlighted by Mia, means that it would be difficult for a non-Catholic to hold the role. As highlighted in section 3.3c (p. 75), some Catholic schools choose to only hire Catholics for RE roles, and many RE teachers in English Catholic schools are required to have completed the Catholic Certificate in Religious Studies. This qualification ensures staff hold 'an understanding of the central truths' of Catholicism and the 'ideals and aims' of Catholic education (Board of Religious Studies, n.d, accessed 05/24).

The master theme of 'life beyond school' supports an ecological understanding (Bronfenbrenner, 2006) of how young people develop both their religious identities and knowledge of sex and relationships. This theme emerged particularly for Mia and Ella, both who present school as one of many social influences within their lives:

Mia: *'you talk to people outside of school, and yeah, we have friends. And yeah, it's not like, the school is like the only side to it.'*

'Through like friends out of school?'

Ella: *'But people choose their own religion more, so they have their own values.'*

Mia emphasises that her friend group extends beyond school, enabling a diversity of perspectives outsides of the Catholic lens. Ella highlights that individual religious identity is not solely determined by the faith characteristics of one's school. Across both narratives, the Catholic RSE framework adopted by School A is constructed as less consequential due to the plurality of influential sources of information and values in the girls' lives.

Despite themes of Catholicism as a normalised aspect of both school and home lives, the majority of participants in School B also appeared to construct Catholic sexual values as out of touch with their lived realities in varying ways. For some, this centred around the perceived lack of 'relatability' within RSE centred around Catholic values, producing a theme of 'Catholicism as unrelatable':

Chloe: *'They need to talk more about like relationships from like, normal people'*

'not everyone practices like religion. So it's like, not something that they probably take into account.'

'the Catholic side of it, it's probably less relatable for a lot of people.'

Ruby: *'So other religions practice different things during sexual relationship and stuff like that, so it doesn't really help others'*

Nisha: *'you could be in like, a healthy relationship but you just don't get married, but then you also do want children'*

Krista: *'I think more on like a healthy relationship but not from a Catholic point of view.'*

Across all of the young women's accounts is the recognition that sexual values are something that vary significantly from person to person and may be shaped by a multiplicity of factors – including both religious and non-religious belief. This further reflects an ecological understanding of sexuality and sexual values as resulting from interactions between multiple social and environmental factors (Bronfenbrenner, 2006). Additionally, this theme intersects with the master themes of 'experiences not reflected' and 'desire to see self in RSE' explored in section 7.2d (pp. 222-224). As highlighted by Chloe and Ruby, the distinct Catholic lens of their RSE may not be helpful to those who practice other or no faith. Further, Nisha appears to the question the exclusion of non-marital relationships within the Catholic ideal, offering a sense that a marital focus within relationships education insufficiently captures the reality of 'good' relationships. Chloe creates a dichotomy between Catholics and 'normal people', situating Catholicism as a fringe-group within wider society. Her overarching desire for 'normal' relationship models, also reflected by Krista, may relate to a broader desire to see oneself within RSE. Relevance is found to be a critically important factor in young people's engagement with sex education content (Coll et al, 2018; King-Hill, 2024). As such, the lack of relatable content for those of no and other faiths to Catholicism within School B's RSE provision is constructed as a significant barrier to engagement and quality. Just as Sell and Reiss (2022) argue RSE that fails to address

religious perspectives may alienate pupils of faith, distinctly faith-orientated RSE can be seen to alienate pupils of different and no faiths. This becomes especially problematic considering the 40% pupils educated within Catholic schools who are not Catholic (CES, *FAQs*, n.d.). As such, the allowance of RSE driven by a 'distinct faith perspective' (Department for Education, 2019a, p.12) may comprise the quality of RSE offered to a significant population of pupils within faith schools. It is arguable that a faith-sensitive approach, that does not substantively focus on Catholicism, may offer a means of exploring Catholic sexual ethics within RSE whilst preserving the engagement of a diverse student body (Phillips et al, 2023; Wareham, 2024).

In parallel to the question of relatability, the participants also question the *attainability* of Catholic sexual values, bringing into question the reality of applying stringent sexual ethics to young peoples' lives:

> Krista: *'they were talking about like, how great that was for them. But like lots of people just wouldn't do that.'*
> *'it's like the pressure to actually keep it up'*
> *'Let's say you're really traditional to like, have kids and everything. Well, it's harder than it sounds.'*
> Ruby: '*But that's not how people do it.'*
> *'I've heard stories of like, people that were like, really good, they were willing to wait till marriage, but then they went like university and then like, everything changed for them, they literally became like different people'*
> Nisha: *'but some people obviously don't follow that, I guess.'*

Ruby, Krista and Nisha reflect a sense of disconnect between the lived reality of sex and relationships for young people, and Catholic sexual ideals. This echoes findings from Maher et al's (2007) study of Catholic college students in the US, which found the majority of young Catholics disagreed with the Church teachings surrounding artificial contraception and pre-

marital sex. Participants within the study constructed Church teachings as a distinct from the reality of sexuality and relationships within their lives (Maher et al, 2007). Further, it was found that young women Catholics were *more* likely to disagree with church teachings, which some attributed to growing alignment with feminist perspectives on women's reproductive and sexual autonomy (Maher et al, 2007). Ultimately, Maher and colleagues conclude (2007) that the young Catholics do not consider the Church a prevalent shaping factor in their navigation of sex and relationships, and rather rely of their own experiences and interaction with secular discourses to inform their decisions. This dissonance is recognised by some staff in Catholic schools. T1 in particular emphasised the need highlight that sex 'still happens outside of marriage and that's why we need to behave safely' and that many young people will want to 'step back' from marital focus of Catholic teachings within RSE (section 5.4, p. 155). Despite this, it seems difficult to reconcile a dominant Catholic focus within RSE when evidence suggests that contemporary Catholics themselves disregard such teachings as unrealistic.

A secondary narrative of Catholic sexual values as difficult to 'keep up' emerges within Krista and Ruby's responses. Huygens' (2020) study of Catholic women in their twenties and thirties in Belgium finds similar theme. Even where women held a strong affiliation with Catholicism and wanted to wait until marriage to engage in sex, this was constructed as an extremely challenging choice that required 'strict' self-discipline (Huygens, 2020, p.14). A majority of the women described adopting more lenient interpretations of Catholic teachings as a means of maintaining attainability, exercising what Huygen's (2020) deems religious agency. This included co-habiting with partners but not sharing a bed, only engaging in non-penetrative sexual acts, only have sex within committed relationships, or waiting until engagement to a partner (Huygens, 2020). Notably, for Ruby, whilst deviation from Catholic teachings is understood as an inevitability, she also constructs this as a moral failing resulting in older peers becoming 'different people' at university. This potentially returns to the psychological tug-of-war between broader understandings and expressions of sexuality and internalised Catholic teachings experienced by some Catholic women (Mahoney, 2008). T2 offers a key example of the necessity to exercise religious agency in navigating Catholic sexual ethics, emphasising that that not all Catholics are 'strict with sex before marriage' (p.130), and exploring her own experiences of alienation as a divorced

woman. Further, she spoke at length about her current partner, to whom she was not married. This experience of negotiation of rigid Catholic teachings clearly shaped her teaching practice, as she emphasised her will to '*get through to the students…the Catholic church teaches this, however, yeah we are all free'* (p. 130). Overall, this indicates a broad understanding, even within Catholic communities, that Catholic sexual ethics alone may not sufficiently capture the realities of human sexuality and relationships. Yet, this narrative is absent from Catholic RSE resources, such as Ten:Ten (2022) or the CES (2019) curriculum. This indicates a significant gap between Catholic RSE design, and the realities of how Catholic teachings actually manifest in peoples' lived experiences.

The creation of space between a 'Catholicism' and the self is further reflected for in Ruby, Nisha and Krista through a master theme of 'forging own religious identity'. Within this, the girls navigated tensions between their own values and that of the Catholic Church, echoing T2's struggles with faith identity and emphasis on heterogenous views within Catholicism (section 5.4, p. 156):

> Ruby: '*I would say I am [Catholic], but in some practices, I don't, erm, take part in.'*
> *'Thing is I am Catholic, but I don't think that a lot of it is what they really teach in like the church. So, erm, like some views I just don't believe in, like, homophobia'*
> *'In church it's more like the Bible, so it's a bit different to the videos.'*
> Krista: '*a lot of it is influenced by the people around like school and my parents and family. And then the other part is like, erm, exploring other sides of things.'*
> *'I wouldn't talk from what I've like learnt, I'd talk from my, my perspective'*
> Nisha: '*let's say the person is Catholic, but they just don't go to a Catholic school, they could have the same like ideas on what I'd be learning.'*

Ruby appears to delineate between the Catholicism modelled by her church and the Bible, which she identifies with, and the more 'traditional' Catholic views upheld within RSE, which she disagrees with. Further, she constructs more conservative presentations of Catholic sexual ethics as misinterpreting core Christian values by suggesting homophobia does not align with 'what they really teach' in church. In doing so, she creates distance between the *institution* of the Catholic Church, and the church she attends. This may further speak to increasing distance between the social values of young Catholics and the Catholic Church's lack of growth around sexual ethics (Hornsby-Smith, 1991; Fulton, 2000; Maher et al, 2007). Further, Ruby's perception of her faith identity demonstrates, as highlighted by T2 (section 5.4, p. 152), that Catholic identity does not imply a static and homogenous value-set.

The experiences of participants reflected within this theme indicate notable resistance to some aspects of faith-orientated Catholic RSE. I pause here to question whether a Catholic school must necessarily deliver sex education imbued with Catholic values. I find Wareham's (2024) argument surrounding faith-sensitive RSE to offer a pertinent response to this. Whilst good RSE will necessarily address faith and other diverse perspectives on sexual ethics, it must also remain sensitive to the needs (cultural, religious, developmental, and educational) of students and resist giving way to faith-based exemptions in content (Wareham, 2024). As highlighted in this section, the young women I spoke expressed several points where a Catholic perspective significantly failed to meet their world view and experiences of romantic and sexual cultures. Most strikingly, some experiences depict Catholic RSE as failing to reflect the perspectives and realities of Catholics themselves. This suggests a significant need to reassess the value and applicability of Catholic RSE curricula content.

7.4 Relationship to Adults

7.4a Trusting Family

The participants' relationships to adults in the context of RSE primarily centred around feelings of trust and mistrust. For many participants, adult family members were trusted sources of information and support as they navigated the complex social terrain

surrounding bodies, sex, and relationships. For Lily and Saffi, their families represented their first source of menstrual education:

> Lily: *'I'd say I learnt it with my family.'*
>
> Saffi: *'I think my parents…'*

Determinants of trustworthiness in adults varied between participants. For Sasha, trust was facilitated through her mother's lack of judgement, whilst for Ella, her brother's age and life experience situated him as a trusted authority on relationships. For Lily, her older sister is trusted due to her shared experience of gender. Sasha, Ruby and Krista position their mothers as key trusted figures for sex and relationships information:

> Sasha: *'I tell my mom everything…she doesn't just like judge.'*
>
> Ella: *'I would talk to, like, my older brother. 'Cuz He's like, much more older and more experienced'*
>
> Ada: *'I feel like I might talk to my mum about something, maybe?'*
>
> Ruby: *'my mum is already like a female role model for things like that.'*
>
> Krista: *'I'd ask my mum. I would not walk up to my dad and be like [laughs, other girls join in] this, that and the other. My siblings? Yeah.'*
>
> Lily: *'I'd feel more comfortable talking to my sister... Like we talk about like, anything. It's like, same gender.'*

I find the sharp contrast between Krista's account of talking to her mum, versus the perceived implausibility of talking to her dad particularly interesting. This juxtaposition was also expressed by Sasha in School A, who highlighted that her dad 'would not be okay' with talking about sex and relationships. This raises a notably question around the gendered aspects of parental sex education. Research shows that many fathers defer to mothers to

act as the primary sex educators for young women, and that some feel their gender would prohibit them from fully understanding 'feelings in relation to periods and that sort of thing' (Bennett, Harden and Anstey, 2018, p. 81). Furthermore, Solebello and Elliot (2011) found that some fathers understood their daughters through a lens of traditional, heteronormative femininity, thus positioning them as sexually virtuous and in need of protection. In turn, this fuelled a prominent sense of discomfort with acknowledging their daughters as sexual beings. This discomfort may be what fuels Sasha and Krista's constructions of their dads as unviable options for sex and relationships information. However, contemporary research does indicate, that with shifting ideals of masculinity and fatherhood, many fathers *want* to play a significant role in educating their daughters about sexuality and relationships, and in fact, feel passionately about ensuring female sexuality is not stigmatised (Nelson, 2018). Ada cites her mum as a potential source of support, but she approaches this with considerably more hesitation than other participants, which could be indicative of the additional barriers faced by LGBTQ+ adolescents communicating with their parents about sex (Flores et al, 2019). Even where parents were willing to discuss LGBTQ+ sexuality, young people report that parental discomfort, heteronormative assumptions, or a lack of knowledge about LGBTQ+ relationships can significantly limit the support offered (Flores et al, 2019.

7.4b Mistrust and feeling unheard

Whilst family played a positive role for many participants, this was not without complication. As such, a master theme of mistrust of family emerged for some of the girls in School A:

Mia: *'Mom and dad both. They're the last people I would go to'*

'when I told my mom that I got a period she literally just went around the whole family [laughs].'

Ella: *'Periods, that would be fine, like it's like a normal thing. But it's anything else…'*

'Yeah, like family drama [laughs]'

Nadia: *'I'd have to ask my mom to take me to the GP, and my Mom would be like, why?'*

Lily: *'because parents would find out.'*

Mia and Ella reflect on parents failing to treat information shared with them as confidential, in turn producing 'family drama' by sharing private information with other family members. Both girls present these moments as comical, but as shown in Mia's assertion that her parents are 'the last people' she would confide in, breaches of privacy can be seen to shape how and where she seeks advice. Notably, Ella also draws distinction between appropriate and inappropriate topics to discuss with her parents, echoing Ruby's reflection on feeling comfortable discussing sexual violence at home, but not sex itself (section 6.3c, p.191). For Ella, this delineation is rooted in a construction of periods as 'normal', thus eschewing subjects beyond menstruation as abnormal, and thus impermissible in the familial context. As with Ruby, this delineation may also reflect an anticipation of parental discomfort in acknowledging their children as sexual beings (Stone et al, 2017; Bennett et al 2017; Elliot, 2010). In turn, menstruation represents a 'safe', desexualised topic.

Lily and Nadia both reflect on parental awareness as a barrier to accessing sexual health advice from medical professional. For both, parental knowledge of sexual behaviour is constructed as a highly undesirable outcome, yet neither substantively explored why this would be the case. It is arguable that this reflects the fear of adult-imposed 'sanctions' for engaging in behaviour perceived as prohibited, as expressed by Sasha (section 6.3b, p. 186). In turn, this speaks to a broader mistrust of adults to respond appropriately to disclosures of

adolescent sexual behaviour. As demonstrated in context of teaching experiences (section 5.3, p. 149), children and young people discussing sexuality can trigger deeply uncomfortable, and at times, uncontrollable emotions in adults, which in turn may result in, unintentionally, judgemental or shaming reactions (Francis, 2016). Such responses may also be further compounded by normative assumptions of how young women should behave in relation to sexuality as established in Chapter Two (section 2.5e and 2.6). In turn, fear of such responses may significantly deter young people from seeking adult support.

Participants across both schools expressed mistrust of teachers in the context of sexuality education and advice:

> Sasha: *'I don't think I would go to a teacher because I think that'll just make everything a bit worse…will just blow everything out of proportion'*
> *'you talk to a teacher, they might like look down on you'*
> *'I feel like it's hard as a Catholic teacher to talk about sexuality'*
> Ella: *'You know, I wouldn't really go to a teacher'*
> *'if they have like views, about like that strongly, and some people, I don't think they should talk about it.'*
> Saffi: *'She Looked at like the gay people as well and was like, you cannot get married.'*
> Mia: *'They don't really know anything about it, either.'*
> Chloe: *'school really encourages to talk to teachers and stuff, but that's not somewhere that I'd go.'*

Three key barriers to trusting teachers as advisors on sexuality and relationship issues emerge. Firstly, Sasha expresses fear that speaking to teachers about problems would only amplify the issue. I understood this to implicitly refer to the role of teachers in escalating safeguarding processes when concerns are presented. This reflects broader pupil anxiety about the consequences of safeguarding escalations, such as parents being contacted

against their will, as found by Allnock and Atkinson (2019). She further highlights risk of being 'looked down on', which returns to her fear of being shamed by adults for engaging in or discussing sex (see section 6.3b, p. 186). In turn, Sasha's mistrust of adults in this context demonstrates that T2's assertion that young people should be confident in 'speaking to people', rather than rely on the internet for information, is not as simple as it may seem (section 5.3, p. 146).

Finally, Sasha highlights teachers' religious views as a potentially key barrier to engaging students in conversations about sex and relationships. Her construction is empathetic to the position of Catholic teachers, constructing sexuality as a difficult topic in this context. All three teachers' experiences would corroborate this tension through the identification of potential areas of conflict between faith and inclusive RSE content (section 5.4, p. 155-157). T1's construction of the Church teachings on same-sex marriage as ' a difficult line', as explored in section 5.4 (p. 155), particularly corroborates Sasha's observation. This difficulty is produced by the ideological gymnastics required by Catholic schools to reconcile 'thorny' Catholic sexual ethics with the principles of inclusive education (Whittle and Henry, 2024, p.2). As explored in section 5.4 (p. 160), this often results in sexuality being dealt with as a pastoral issue, rather than within RSE or other formal learning settings (Whittle and Henry, 2024; Henry, 2024). The perception as faith as a barrier to trusting adults is corroborated by Ella and Saffi, who both describe an RE lesson in which they felt a Catholic teacher unfairly targeted LGBTQ+ pupils in her assertion of the Catholic prohibition of same-sex marriage. To both girls, this was an inappropriate expression of personal belief, and in turn, they remember this as a particularly hostile interaction. Arguably, this plays into Ella's feeling that teachers are not trusted advisory figures in this context.

Mistrust of teachers is further identified in Mia's observation that staff do not appear knowledgeable about different sexualities or gender identities. Gaps in staff knowledge and confidence surrounding teaching on LGBTQ+ identities are therefore identified by both students and staff alike (Cumper et al, 2023). Mia's experience may in fact confirm T1's fear that she does not 'know enough…to do a good job' (section 5.7, p. 169), or her concerns surrounding other the abilities of other staff in relation to RSE (section 5.6, p.166). As T1 highlights, this gap in provision is indicative in a lack of 'up to date' training and information

available to schools in this area (section 5.7, p. 169). It is also notable that T1 had sole responsibility for RSE content design in School A, a vastly different environment to the collective departmental problem solving described by Teachers Two and Three (section 5.6, p. 166). As such, she did not have access to the same collaborative approach that may have enabled other staff to fill gaps in topics she felt less confident in. Without adequate supportive structures, teachers are found to avoid sex education topics that challenge heteronormative narratives and may default to harmful norms (Dadvand and Cahill, 2021). In turn, the absence of a team to support T1 in navigating the already challenging task of providing LGBTQ+ inclusive RSE in a Catholic school may have contributed to the maintenance of a heteronormative focus in RSE – as observed by Mia. Whilst the pupils in School B still did not feel the coverage of LGBTQ+ was sufficient, they did not necessarily share in Mia's perception of teachers as not knowledgeable in this area. It is therefore arguable that the differences in support available to RSE facilitators across both schools, at least partially, contribute to this perception.

The construction of faith as a potential barrier to talking to adults is also reflected within the theme of 'distrust of adults as advisors' for participants in School B. This theme particularly centred around one of the Ten:Ten videos, in which it was suggested Priests could be a potential source of advice and support for young people when navigating sex and relationships:

> Chloe: *'in the videos quite often, they go into like a church and talk to a priest about what they think of the thing [giggles}'*
> Krista: *'I always think that's odd because you're not gonna walk into church and be like what do you think about this'*
> Ruby: *'that would be a bit weird'*

For Chloe, Krista and Ruby, the notion of talking to a religious leader about issues of sex and relationships is constructed as unrealistic and comical. This is indicative of a gulf between

Ten:Ten's vision of how young people ought to navigate sexuality, and their lived reality. This issue is recognised in T2's problematisation of the Ten:Ten resources as both 'one dimensional' and 'too Catholic' (section 5.7, p. 174). This speaks to a broader sense that RSE, in faith contexts and beyond, is premised on misrepresentations of young peoples' actual preferences and needs, as addressed in section 7.2 (p. 214 onwards). Whilst Chloe and Krista's rejection of Priests as RSE providers may reflect their non-religious standpoints, it is notable that Ruby, as a practicing Catholic young woman, also sees this as an implausible option. This may further reflect the growing dissent between young, socially liberal Catholics, and the institutional Church (Hornsby-Smith, 1991; Fulton, 2000). Further, across all three accounts, sex is constructed as an improbable topic to raise in a church, which may reflect an imbedded view of sexuality and Catholicism as mutuality exclusive entities.

In School B, participants' relationship to the school based RSE further shaped by a master theme of 'not feeling seen or heard by adults', both within school and at a societal level:

> Ruby: *'they don't understand how pupils will take it.'*
> *'young people should be involved in their education rather than older people making decisions for them.'*
> Chloe: *'they should take into consideration the opinions of the young people that are, like, going to learn it.'*
> Krista: *'the videos we did it was mostly like a list of what should be in and like not really what it should look like for yourself.'*

Ruby and Chloe express frustration at the top-down approach of education policy, feeling that young peoples' experiences and opinions are not included in the development of RSE. Considering the significant issues in the extend and quality of youth consultation that occurred in the development of statutory RSE (Setty and Dobson, 2023), Ruby and Chloe's frustration is arguably well-placed. As explored in section 3.2f (p. 65), it is likely that the DfE failed to sufficiently facilitate 'meaningful and effective' youth voice and participation in the

design of the content and approach of statutory RSE (UNCRC Periodic Report, 2002, p.7). Across both accounts, the girls reflect a sense of disempowerment by such decision-making being unavailable to them. Interestingly, all three teachers reflected moments in which students' voices were powerful catalysts for change within their school RSE provision (section 5.3, p. 152). As such, this indicates will from some educators, albeit with some moments of resistance, to consider young people the arbiters of their own education. This stands in tension with the overall approach adopted at the policy level by the DfE in relation to statutory RSE.

Krista critiques the Ten:Ten videos for leaving little space for pupils to reflect on what sexuality and relationships could look like for them, instead adopting a more dogmatic, didactic approach. Information about how Ten:Ten developed their resources is limited, and it is unclear whether youth consultation was a part of their programme design. Examining the experiences of the participants in School B, and the reflections on the resources offer by Teachers Two and Three (section 5.7, p. 174; section 5.3, p. 152), a considerable sense of disconnect emerges between the young women's desired learning style and the approach adopted by Ten:Ten. This begs the question as to how external RSE resources might be better vetted to ensure that adequately reflect the current learning needs of their targeted beneficiaries.

7.5 Reliance on Self-Education

7.5a Deprivation of information

7.5a (i) Feeling deprived of 'full picture'

Across both groups, a prominent master theme emerged of 'feeling deprived of the full picture of sex and relationships'. In School A, this was largely expressed by Saffi and Sasha:

Saffi: *'They don't really explain like, why.'*

'I don't think we talk about it [contraception] at all in PSHE'

Sasha: *'Like condoms that type of stuff because no one really talks about it. It's just unspoken.'*

'I don't think they take a lot of context in, their relationship. They don't go into like alternative solution'

Both Saffi and Sasha's accounts depict a sense of information actively being withheld within RSE. In part, this theme emerges in relation to a strong desire for nuance and complexity, reflected by both participants. Saffi highlights the absence of *why* in teachers' admonishment of social media. Further, Sasha's critique of what she felt was a one-dimensional approach to 'toxic relationships' within RSE, in which students were advised to call Child Line. Both participants appear highly attuned to the fact there is more to the picture than let on and seem keen to engage in conversations that acknowledge and explore the complexity of relationships and the world around us. Lack of nuance is also identified as a prevalent gap in sex education provision by students in Adams Tucker et al's (2016, p.344) work, who criticism content for not going beyond 'the basics'. Further, participants in Setty's (2023) study expressed a desire for more space to substantively explore tensions and complexities relating to relationships, gender, and sexuality. The absence of more detailed coverage of certain topics within RSE may be driven by both a persistent underestimation of young peoples' sexual knowledge and capacity to engage with complex topics (King-Hill, 2024; Cumper et al, 2023), and a lack of staff confidence owing to limited resources and/or support (Francis, 2016; Dadvand and Cahill, 2021).

In parallel to this, the participants also highlight silence around basic sexual health information within School A's PSHE – constructing contraception as a 'unspoken' topic. Notably, the lack of contraceptive education within School A was also felt by T1 (section 5.4, p. 155), for whom its absence was a considerable source of professional anxiety. It is arguable that the approach of silence and signposting described by T1 (section 5.4, p. 155)

mirrors the dominant approach of Catholic schools ignoring 'tricky' areas of scripture surrounding LGBTQ+ identity (Whittle and Henry, 2024). By delegating responsibility for contraceptive education to external services, School A do not have to broach the admonition of contraceptive methods within Catholic sexual ethics within RSE. Saffi and Sasha construct contraception as an expected component of RSE provision, sharing Wareham's (2024) construction of factual information as part of the core educational goods provided by RSE. In turn, they appear highly aware of its absence, creating a feeling that key information is being withheld from them. For Saffi and Sasha, a sense of frustration that the full picture of sex and relationships is *just* out of sight is palpable. This feeling appeared to be further reflected by Krista, Chloe and Ruby in School B.

> Krista: '*I know, it sounds bad, but they point out all the bad stuff, so it's like in your face'*
> *'And then like, the pressure of actually being in a relationship is a lot more different, a lot harder to deal with'*
> Chloe: '*they need to involve more stuff, like, content about like sexual assault and rape, because they don't really speak about it, except people that like, they says that they did consent to having sex with someone, but they like, weren't in a relationships, like maybe a one night stand'*
> Ruby: '*we were talking about the female side of it. No one talked about the male side of it.'*

Krista emphasises the absence of positive depictions of sex and relationships within RSE, again contributing to a sense that a significant aspect of human sexuality had been omitted from the conversation. As with the participants in School A, the latter three quotations also depict a desire for nuance and complexity within RSE (Adams Tucker et al, 2016). Arguably, this challenges of T2's assertion that young people appear unwilling to engage in challenging conversations within RSE '*you can't talk about anything without them being triggered*' (p.125). Krista reflects feeling that the true difficulty of romantic relationships had not been

sufficiently or realistically addressed, further supporting the centrality of relatability as contingent for engagement in RSE as found by Coll et al (2018). Chloe wrestles with the absence of discussions surrounding sexual violence, highlighting that the closest the Ten:Ten resources get is the depiction of one-night stands. This conflation of casual sex and violence is concerning, not least as it brings into the question the discursive treatment of non-marital relationships within Catholic RSE, but also as it is unclear whether Chloe herself believes the two to be comparable. Ruby also highlights the sole female focus of conversations about sexual violence in school, again reflecting a feeling that a crucial part of the picture had not been disclosed. This relates to the master theme of 'empathy for boys' experiences' explored in section 6.4b (p. 197), further substantiating Keddie (2021) and Ging et al's (2024) findings that girls often report male experiences of sexual violence as missing narratives within sex education. For all the participants, it appears that the reality of sexual landscapes had not been sufficiently captured within their RSE. Underpinning this theme is the feeling that that there is much more to 'it' than the narratives upheld in RSE, and as result, much remains unaddressed.

7.5a (ii) Anxiety and loneliness of not knowing

Across both groups, participants expressed feelings of anxiety and isolation associated with not knowing information surrounding sex and relationships. As such, a theme of 'anxiety and loneliness of not knowing' emerged for both schools.

> Sasha: *'Obviously, you don't really know what's right and wrong in your relationships, since you've not really been in one… you might not realise you're in a bad relationship.'*
> *'she's been through everything. So it's like, I can learn from her experiences'*
> Saffi: *'Just to see like signs, like what's right and what's wrong?'*
> Ella: *'then you know you're not going through it alone'*
> Nadia: *'Like advice?'*

Sasha and Saffi reflect a sense of anxiety surrounding being able to determine whether a relationship is healthy or not. Whilst 'healthy relationships' were addressed within School A's RSE provision, both girls indicate a desire for more robust models of 'right and wrong' in the context of relationships. For both, the absence of such 'signs' appears to produce a sense of fear that one could end up in a potentially dangerous situation without knowing. This fear may also reflect the prevalent concerns surrounding violence against women and girls raised by students and staff alike (section 6.2, p. 180; section 5.2, p. 141), particularly given the heighted climate surrounding this topic at the time of data collection.
This also speaks to a broader theme of the young women wanting to feel safe and prepared when undertaking relationships, as addressed in the next section (7.5b (i), p. 260). Building on this, it is arguable that the desire to avoid 'wrong' situations is driven by the narrative of poor sexual outcomes as resulting from irresponsibility or some form of character deficit (Shoveller and Johnson, 2006).

The theme of loneliness emerges in Sasha, Ella and Nadia's desire to know others have experienced the same things as them. Discussions of sex and bodies are imbued with shame at a societal level, and without points of connection, navigating such issues can be an intensely isolating experience (Lodge et al, 2022; Phillips et al, 2023). As found by Cumper et al (2023), many teachers explicitly position RSE as means of tackling the shame, isolation and worry that young people may face if not adequately informed about sex, changing bodies and relationship. For Sasha, knowing her Mum has also navigated puberty, sexuality, and relationships as an adolescent girl offered both a sense of comfort and a source of guidance. Similarly, Ella reflects a desire to hear about others' experiences of relationships 'so you're not going through it alone'. Both perspectives reflect a desire for reassurance, which is also articulated by McGeeney and Hanson's (2017) finding that young people want to hear more about adult's positive experiences of relationships. It is notable that the desire to learn about others' firsthand experiences, along with Nadia's want for 'advice', within RSE contravenes the boundaried approach necessarily adopted by some teachers. For instance, personal questions were constructed as a clear transgression of lesson ground rules for T2 (section 5.5, p. 164).

The theme of 'anxiety of not knowing' continued across the School B focus group:

> Ada: *'you sort of have to laugh a bit about it, so you don't seem like you're sort of too nervous to talk about stuff like that'*
>
> Nisha: *'you never know if it's right or wrong.'*
>
> Krista: *'what's normal, normal, happy, healthy but not with like, 'oh, this, that and the other really should happen'*
>
> Ruby: *'like a real life perspective? Like case studies.'*

For Nisha and Krista, this theme echoed Sasha and Saffi's worries around being able to discriminate between right and wrong in the context of relationships (p. 215). Krista's description of wanting to know what is 'normal, happy, healthy' reflects a desire to feel informed and prepared, but also a desire for social acceptance – a desire to know one's expression of sexuality or relationships does not deviate from the norm. Setty (2023a) finds that young people are inundated with extensive information about sex and relationships which can result in prevalent assumptions and confusion around what constitutes 'normal'. Similarly to Krista, Setty's (2023) participants expressed desire to critically engage with conceptualisation of normality within RSE. A desire for social acceptance in the context may also relate to the production of 'unsanctioned behaviours' (Shoveller and Johnson, 2006) within broader discourse around sexuality. In turn, young people may want to ensure that their experiences fall within the remit of social acceptability. Ada's quotation reflects a different form of anxiety pertaining to the social pressure to appear sexually knowing and confident in front of peers. This speaks to a broader theme surrounding fear of peer judgement, as explored in section 6.5c (p. 207). As argued by Flacking et al (2014) and Read et al (2010), social acceptance is critical in young people's understandings of status and wellbeing. As such, to appear nervous or sexually unknowing may be understood, to Ada, as potentially compromising one's position within the wider peer group.

7.5b Resilience and resourcefulness

All of the participants were keenly aware of significant gaps in the information available to them regarding sex, bodies and relationships. This dearth of information was juxtaposed by an ardent desire to feel safe, prepared and informed when navigating the social and sexual world around them, which was reflected across both groups. The young women reflected significant resilience in the face of limited resources, highlighting the development of their own methods of finding and verifying information which RSE failed to cover.

7.5b (i) Desire to feel safe and prepared

A master theme of 'desire to feel safe and prepared' emerged for participants in both groups. In School A, this theme related to a sense of feeling ill-equipped to navigate the inevitabilities of sex and relationships:

> Sasha: *'it's really difficult to know how to respond and how to react properly when you haven't really been told'*
> *'we should talk about it, like talk about safe sex and stuff? Because it's inevitable'*
> *'If you're not ready you shouldn't do it. And if you are, here's what you should do.'*
> Saffi: *'I think you should support your friends'*
> Mia: *'it's like, you need to be educated on it [relationships].*
> *'you shouldn't get it, but in case you do, use advice and stuff'*
> Lily: *'I feel like some of us aren't mature enough to like, understand everything'*

For Sasha and Mia, the provision of information on sex and relationships is a necessity. To omit discussion of either ignores the reality of sexuality and relationships as integral parts of adolescence. Both suggest models of RSE where information is provided 'in case you do', therefore enabling young people to make safe and informed decisions about their own behaviour. This follows Renold et al's (2023) finding that young people recognise the critical importance of RSE provision and want more reliable opportunities to learn about sex and

relationships. Interestingly, Sasha and Saffi highlight a feeling of being ill-equipped to support their peers due to an absence of information on how to do so appropriately. Thus, the desire to feel prepared extends beyond navigating their own experiences of sex and relationships, but also to supporting their friends to navigate these experiences safely. Lily's desire to feel prepared appears to be rooted in the recognition of a perceived deficit in 'maturity' in her peers. It is unclear whether she implicates herself in this deficit – perhaps worrying about a lack of life experience or knowledge or rather, attempts to distance herself from the perceived lack of preparedness and safety of her peers. Arguably, for Lily, the desire for preparedness is entwined with a desire to feel mature.

The theme of 'desire to feel safe and prepared' was also reflected by Ruby and Krista in School B:

> Ruby: '*How to stay safe, contraception.'*
> Krista: *'the main priority should be like being safe and like knowing like the consequences of your actions.'*

Notably, both girls felt safety should be the main priority of RSE. Safety in the context of RSE has many possible meanings, and it is not always clear to which the participants refer. Ruby aligns 'staying safe' with contraception, which follows a traditional construction of 'safe sex' as mitigating risk of pregnancy and/or STIs. Krista aligns safety with knowing 'consequences', which potentially also refers to the mitigation of unwanted sexual health outcomes. Notably, safety could also refer to safety from violence or abuse. Both girls appear to default to discourse of sexual consequence, as outlined in section 6.3b (p. 185). Whilst factual information around sexual health and the risks of sexuality form an important component of educational goods facilitated by RSE (Wareham, 2024), it is arguable that their prominence within the girls' conceptions of RSE reflects the broader discursive construction of sex as *solely* something consequential, rather than pleasurable. This construction draws on the discourses of female sexuality as violence, victimisation and morality, outline by Fine (1992), and also

the dominant public health focus on tackling 'risk' within adolescent sexuality (see section 2.4c, p. 27).

7.5b (ii) Reliance on own information networks – social media, peer-education and lived experience

This subsection explores a series of master themes demonstrating the participants innovation of and reliance on their own information sources to fill gaps in formal RSE provision. In School A, a master theme of 'reliance on peer information networks' emerged for Mia, Saffi, Ella and Nadia:

> Mia: *'probably speak to my friends, again.'*
>
> Saffi: *'you would just figure it out.'*
>
> *'You'd probably try to find it out on your phone or ask your friends?'*
>
> *'there's always someone that knows'*
>
> Nadia: *'like other friends, who told them and then they'll tell you'*
>
> *'Depends how many times it's been passed. So if it's some, like, random person that I have, like one lesson with'*
>
> Ella: *'I think we're used to it [supporting friends] now 'cuz we talk about it more.'*

For all four girls, friends were central sources of information and support relating to sexuality and relationships. As highlighted by Ella, supporting and being supported by friends was a normalised and expected part of her social world. For Saffi and Mia, friends were situated as one of the first places they would go for information about sex and relationships. Further, Saffi constructs a sense of dependability in this form of support, highlighting that 'there's always someone' who knows the right answer. This, unsurprisingly, echoes Byron's (2017) finding that adolescents most commonly cite friends, along with pornography and the internet more broadly, as their primary sources of sexual health and

relationships information. While the potentially positive role of friendship has long been neglected in the sphere of adolescent sexual health, Byron (2017) argues that friend groups offer an accessible, trustworthy and usually safe space for young people to explore issues surrounding sex and relationships.

Renold et al (2023) found that friends played a key role in filling the gaps left by school-based sex education by correcting others' misconceptions, providing relationship advice and dismantling harmful norms (i.e. normalising female masturbation). Notably, the schools site remains integral to sexual learning even where formal sex education was lacking, in that it acts as a social site for informal conversations with peers in playgrounds, corridors and classrooms (Renold et al, 2023).For many of the young women, adults were constructed as inconsistently trustworthy (with mothers as the exception for some), judgemental, and potentially responding punitively (see section 6.5c, p. 207; section 7.4b, p. 248). In turn, peer-support represents a 'tactical response' to disengaging school-based sex education and limited support from adults more broadly (Byron, 2017, p.407). Of course, information provided by peers is not always accurate. Interestingly, Nadia was the only participant to explore the reliability of information provided by peers, highlighting that they may have got that information from other people. She describes a process of verifying information, by evaluating how many times and from whom the information had been passed on before trusting it. Overall, peer support is identified as a central facet of these young women's navigation of the world around them and demonstrates clear limits in terms of what adults and schools can offer. This is not to dismiss the role of the school in supporting young people, but rather to highlight that where adults and institutions fail, young people find ways to support themselves.

Interestingly, the young women at School B expressed more discomfort discussing sexuality and relationships with friends (see section 6.3c, p. 191), with Krista stating she would not go to friends 'outright'. As such, the participants in School B did not cite friendships as a central source of sexual information or support.

Reliance on self-education was further demonstrated for Saffi, Sasha and Lily through a master theme of 'learning through experience':

> Saffi: *'Just like you get it once a month. Deal with it. [laughter]'*
>
> Sasha: *'Just life experience? or like other friends, who told them and then they'll tell you.'*
>
> Lily: *'Yeah. I had to!'*

Sasha constructs 'life experience' as the source of information provided by friends. As such, friends' experiences become learning tools – perhaps cautionary ones – that enable her to better understand issues surrounding sex and relationships. Notably, for Saffi and Lily this theme specifically related to their experiences of menstruation, in which learning through lived experience became a necessity. For both participants, the recurrent presence of their periods each month was their primary source of learning about menstruation. As Saffi reflects, the extent of her primary school education on the subject amounted to 'you get it once a month, deal with it'. Menstrual education is included within the statutory RSHE guidance from the end of primary school, and the proposed updated guidance includes coverage of menstrual health conditions such as endometriosis and PCOS (Department for Education, 2019a; 2024). However, evidence suggests that much nuance is still missing from school-based approaches to menstrual education, particularly surrounding cycle lengths, symptoms, and social stigma which can be a prevalent source of shame and anxiety for young women, and (Wigmore-Sykes, Ferris & Singh, 2020). As such, many young women are still left to 'deal with' their periods and learn through experience

For the School A group, a further master theme emerged of 'social media as a learning tool'. This theme offers a potential rebuttal to the negative construction of young people's use of online resources presented by T2 and T3 (5.3, p. 132- 133).

Ella: '*especially on social media, like you know about it more, because people talk about it.'*

Sasha: '*I think it's more about like, diversity. What you what you, what you see is kind of what you expect'*

Mia: '*with sexuality. Like, there's celebrities aren't straight, and you think that is okay'*

Lily: '*on social media you learn more about relationships, and how like, you can like, you know, like stuff, traits that are bad.'*

Saffi: 'I *keep seeing like Tik Toks about that for some reason. It's, it's like someone crying and then it's like, then it's them saying, 'Oh, wait, I forgot. I'm a boy'*

The pivotal impact online spaces can have over our understanding and practices of sexuality and gender have been recognised since the mainstreaming of the internet in the 1990s (Cooper, 1998). In contrast to seeking advice from parents, teachers or medical professionals, the internet offers a largely discrete, accessible and fast means of finding out about sex and relationships (Simon and Daneback, 2013). For the participants in School A, social media appeared to offer insight into sexual diversity and healthy relationship skills that was left unaddressed within RSE. Ella and Lily talk about the role of social media in enabling more conversations around healthy relationships, and thus bolstering their confidence in recognising unhealthy behaviours. Sasha and Mia describe social media as supporting the visibility and acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities. For Sasha, representation is constructed as an important tool in social change as 'what you see is kind of what you expect'. Interestingly, Saffi reflects on TikTok as a vehicle for questioning gender norms, particularly surrounding normative masculinity.

The centrality of social media in my discussions with the participants follows Renold et al's (2023) finding that *most* young people are learning about sex, sexuality and relationships through social media and other online sources. Echoing Saffi's experience, the participants in Renold and colleagues' (2023) study identified TikTok as a particularly useful resource in

providing information and advice that was otherwise missing from their formal and informal sex education. Topics most often explored through social media were found to include LGBTQ+ identities, sexual pleasure, body image, healthy relationships and mental health (Renold et al, 2023). Recent years have seen a growing interest in TikTok content explicitly designed to provide sex education under the label of 'SexEdTok' (Fowler, Schoen and Morain, 2021). As argued by Fowler, Schoen and Morain (2021), this rise speaks to the inadequacies of school-based sex education in meeting young peoples' needs, particularly those with marginalised identities. Certainly, for the girls in School A, TikTok and other forms of social media offer avenues for nuance they felt had been missing from their RSE lessons.

The safety of young peoples' social media usage – TikTok in particular - has often been queried by adults. This is largely surrounding risk of exposure to sexually inappropriate material, drug and alcohol content, cyber-bullying, and associated negative mental health outcomes (Shahzadm 2023). Fowler, Schoen and Morain (2021) highlight two central challenges with sex education content on TikTok. First, that the algorithmic nature of the platform means that young people are likely seeing content amplified based on popularity, rather than quality or information accuracy (Fowler, Schoen and Moral, 2021). Second, there is significant opportunity for harmful misinformation and norms surrounding sex and relationships to be upheld, and young people may not always be able to determine where this occurs. The authors highlight that there has been a rise in content produced by medical professionals in an effort to challenge the proliferation of sexual misinformation of TikTok, such as gynaecologists challenging expectations to for young women to remove pubic hair, yet the scale of inaccurate information makes this an insurmountable task (Fowler, Schoen and Moral, 2021).

Further, social media has played a central role in the rise of 'misogyny influencers', which has seen a significant resurgence of harmful right-wing ideals surrounding gender and sexuality (Setty, 2023b). This movement, emblematised by Andrew Tate, plays on the anxieties of young men and substantively lead to a shift in the treatment of women and girls through normalisation of misogynistic and anti-feminist positionalities (Setty, 2023b). Overall, some degree of concern surrounding the reliance on social media as sex education is, as demonstrated by T2 and T3 (5.3, p. 132-133, warranted. However, it is also important to

acknowledge that young people are not blind to these issues. As found by Renold and colleagues (2023), young people were often keenly aware and critical of the fact that much of what they see online is shaped by algorithms and misinformation. Further, many young people described methods differentiating between useful and less useful resources online, however, did reflect they would like more tools to discern misinformation (Renold et al, 2023). As explored in section 6.2 (p. 181), Lily, Sasha and Saffi reflected on implementing their own strategies to maintain online safety and mitigate virtual sexual harassment on social media, indicating a critical understanding on risks on online platforms. Critique of social media as a learning tool was reflected most prominently in School B, through Ruby's and Nisha's distancing from reliance on social media for information:

> Ruby: '*they adopt that view very quickly, without, before like understanding all of the different perspectives'*
> Nisha: '*people obviously have different opinions, and then it just goes everywhere…and then you choose which one you probably agree with'*

Despite highlighting the supportive role of online resources in navigating sexuality and relationships, a master theme of 'lack of reliable resources' emerged for participants across both schools.

> Saffi: '*Googling, yeah, just find like an article somewhere'*
> *'I don't know, I don't know [where friends get information]'*
> Ada: '*It's hard to find stuff that's direct and honest about what it actually is.'*
> *'It can be kind of hard as well to find like stuff out about sex on the internet, because, like, often, it's like, some inappropriate'*
> Krista: '*If it was something a bit more, I know a few websites, but normally it's just google.'*
> Ruby: '*the Google box that comes up!'*

As Saffi, Krista and Ruby highlight, without knowledge of specific sex and relationships resources, young people rely on Google for key information. Further, as Ruby's response demonstrates, this information may be determined by the source the Google algorithm deems most relevant, meaning the actual source may not be clear or reliable. Ada emphasises the difficulties of finding information about sex that is both honest and *not* from pornography or other explicit sources. This master theme speaks to a prevailing lack of easily accessible, clear, sources of safe, evidence-informed and reliable sex and relationships information for young people. Further, it demonstrates that while online sources may offer considerable value to young people's sexual and relational development, as highlighted in the previous paragraphs, the internet remains a largely unregulated and ever-changing space. As such, it's role within young people's learning about sex and relationships should not be accepted uncritically. This suggests for space to explore the complexity of information surrounding sex and relationships online within RSE, which was not facilitated through the highly cautious approach adopted by T2 and T3 (section 5.3, p. 133).

7.6 Conclusion

Chapter Seven has offered a unique insight into young women's experiences of early statutory RSE implementation in Catholic secondary schools. Pupil experiences of statutory RSE remain underexplored within education research, owing the relative infancy of the policy's implementation (see section 3.2d, p. 61). Building on this, empirical work examining the specific gendered experiences of RSE for young women, and the impact of RSE delivered from a distinctly Catholic perspective on young people in England is largely non-existent. As such, this chapters offers a novel and timely contribution to contemporary sex education research.

This chapter has explored four overarching themes produced through synthesis of emergent experiential themes express by eleven young women in Year 9:

- (Dis)engagement in RSE
- Conflicted Relationship to Catholicism

- Relationship to Adults
- Reliance on Self-Education

Overall, this chapter substantively addresses RQ 2 *What are young women's lived experiences of statutory RSE in Catholic schools?* and RQ 3 *Does RSE delivered in Catholic schools reflect and meet the current needs of young women in England?* The young women's experiences of RSE explored within this chapter are defined by a pervasive sense of disengagement and alienation, resulting from content that felt poorly matched to their life stage, worldview and identities (section 7.2d, p. 222 onwards). This feeling of disengagement was intensified by RSE content that rarely felt relevant, owing to over-repetition, oversimplified explanations and tokenistic approaches to LGBTQ+ identities. For participants across both schools, the Catholic lens of RSE content was a compounding factor for disengagement (section 7.3b, p. 239), as the marital focus of Catholic sexual values was perceived as irrelevant to their age group and unattainable to some. Further, even for young women who identified as Catholic, stringent Catholic sexual values, such as the admonition of LGBTQ+ relationships and contraception, were perceived as out of touch with their own values. Building on Adams Tucker et al's (2016) construction of content relevance as necessary for student engagement in RSE, the young women's experiences explored in the chapter demonstrate that an absence of relevance and relatability results in RSE that decisively does not reflect and meet their needs. It is, however, worth noting that many of the issues highlighted in this chapter speak to broader failures in the design and implementation of RSE. As such, failure to meet and reflect young women's needs is by no means a distinctly Catholic problem. That said, this chapter demonstrates that Catholicism could be seen to exacerbate existing issues in young people's experiences of statutory RSE more broadly.

Many of the participants also expressed a significant sense of mistrust of adults in the context of RSE, rooted in anticipation of poor and judgemental responses. Furthermore, the majority of participants reflected feeling that information and nuance was being withheld from them. Both of these themes catalysed a reliance on self-education methods, including social media, life experiences and friends, yet participants highlighted issues in reliability for

some of these sources. This indicates a persistent gap between the RSE content delivered across both schools, and the young women's actual needs.

Chapter seven also has addressed RQ 4 *How do the experiences of staff delivering RSE in Catholic schools collude or contrast with young women's experiences*? In School A, the girls' perceptions of insufficient coverage of LGBTQ+ identities and contraception within their RSE lessons substantiated T1's professional anxiety surrounding both topics (section 5.4, p. 155) Across both schools, LGBTQ+ relationships were identified by the young women and teachers (T1 and T2) alike as a significant area for improvement within RSE. Notably, Whilst the teachers emphasised their position as LGBTQ+ allies (section 5.4, p. 158 onwards), the young women expressed feeling that teachers did not share their up-to-date awareness or knowledge of different identities, owing to generational differences. In School B, the rejection of conservative Catholic values expressed by both T2 and T3 was echoed throughout the young women's relationship to Catholicism and perception of the Ten:Ten resources. Conversely, behavioural expectations for the RSE classroom appeared to differ between T2 and some of the young women in School B, with humour constructed as a valuable tool for navigating discomfort for pupils, rather than something to be managed. Finally, all three teachers expressed some degree of concern surrounding young peoples' use of social media and online information sources, with speaking to adults constructed as the preferrable way to seek advice surrounding sex and relationships (section 5.3, p. 145). However, the majority of young women expressed significant distrust of both teachers and adult family members in this context, resulting from fear of poor and judgemental responses. In turn, all of the pupil participants relied heavily on self-education methods, including social media and information provided by friends. Social media in particular was understood to be valuable, especially with regard to learning about different sexual and gender identities, and healthy relationships. Whilst some of the young women acknowledged issues in the reliability of online information, the majority of participants expressed a strong desire to feel safe and prepared, therefore self-education was needed to fill the gaps left by school based RSE.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

8.1 Research Rationale and Aims

The research discussed in this thesis aimed to offer a rich insight into young women's lived experiences and perceptions of statutory RSE in Catholic schools in England. Young people pervasively report that RSE fails to adequately reflect their experiences and meet their needs (King-Hill, 2024; Coll et al, 2018; Setty, 2023a). Catholic schools occupy a unique position within English education policy which, alongside the allowance of RSE from a 'distinct faith perspective', enables the delivery of RSE premised on both normative sex education discourse, and Catholic sexual ethics (Department for Education, 2019a, p. 12). Both secular sex education, and Catholic sexual values have been argued to uphold potentially damaging and restrictive ideals of womanhood and sexuality (Fine, 1992; Ruether, 2000; Wareham, 2024). In turn, the core objective of this research was to explore whether young women feel Catholic RSE adequately supports them in navigating contemporary socio-sexual 'ecosystems', and how it intersects with their broader experiences of the world around them (Setty, 2023a, p.4). In order to enrich understanding of the RSE delivered to young women in Catholic schools, this study also sought the lived experiences and perceptions of teachers actively facilitating RSE in Catholic secondary schools. In bridging analysis of both teacher and student perspectives of RSE delivery in contemporary Catholic schools, this thesis provides a seldom-offered insight into the 'secret garden' of Catholic education in England (Grace, 2002, p. xi) and asks whether this learning context can best support the development and wellbeing of young women in the 21st century.

8.2 Research Design and Limitations

8.2a Research Philosophy and Design

The research discussed throughout this thesis comprised a small-scale, qualitative study of young women and teacher's experiences of Catholic RSE. This research was underpinned by a feminist methodology, with a view to challenging the historic marginalisation of women's voices and experiences as a site of knowledge production (Devault, 1996; Harding, 1987). Further, my approach to data collection and analysis was informed by feminist reflexivity, as such, I understand the knowledge and interpretations produced throughout this thesis as contingent on my positionality and 'baggage' as a researcher (Arendell, 1997). In recognising the research relationships and data explored within this thesis as intrinsically shaped by my proximity to power structures and identity as a white, middle-class, non-Catholic woman in relation to the participants, this work rejects the ideal of 'hygienic' and value-free social research (Kelly et al, 1994; Risjord, 2014).

This research is rooted in a constructivist ontology and draws on a 'braided' interpretivist epistemology which combines feminist standpoint theory, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. In turn, young women's 'standpoints' and lived experiences are constructed as the starting point of knowledge production within this research (Smith, 1992; Tuohy et al, 2013) Building on this, I understand interpretation, both from myself and the participants, as central to the production of meaning throughout this thesis (Willis, 2007). The application of multiple epistemologies reflects my decision to employ IPA through a feminist lens, building on the small, but emerging body of work that combines IPA and feminist-standpoint theory within qualitative inquiry (Cohen et al, 2021). IPA was utilised due to its explicitly phenomenological focus (Smith et al, 2009), which enabled the centring of young women and teacher experiences across the data analysis. Furthermore, the integration of researcher reflections within IPA was highly compatible with the feminist, reflexive ethos underpinning the research (Flood, 2010; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). The possibilities of rich, experiential insight facilitated by IPA have been underutilised within feminist research. By adopting this 'braided' methodological framework, this study has offered an

innovative approach to the exploration of young women's experiences of RSE in Catholic schools from a feminist perspective.

The study discussed comprised of three semi-structures teacher interviews, and two focus groups with young women, conducted across two Catholic secondary schools in England. 11 young women took part in the focus groups in total. Focus groups were selected due to their often-underappreciated capacity to support engagement in 'sensitive' topics, and less hierarchical approaches to research with young people (Frey and Fontana, 1993; Morgan and Kruger, 1993; Heary and Hennessy, 2002). In turn, this thesis builds upon a small body of research in which IPA is adapted to support in-depth analysis of focus group data (Flowers et al, 2000; Love et al, 2020). One-to-one interviews were conducted with key RSE staff at each school, owing to the smaller sample of RSE teachers. This approach builds upon a long-standing tradition of interviewing within feminist and IPA research, respectively (Devault and Gross, 2012; Smith et al, 2009). Applying an adapted IPA framework (see Table 9, p. 127), superordinate and master themes were produced from the staff interviews, and superordinate, master and overarching themes were produced from the student focus groups. All themes emerged from experiential statements expressed by the young women and teachers, enabling phenomenological insight into their lived experiences of Catholic RSE delivery. As a principal aim of this research was to centre young women's voices in research and policy conversations surrounding Catholic RSE, the research design was underpinned by key ethical principles for research with children and young people, including minimising harm, supporting informed consent, and maintaining confidentiality (Brady and Graham, 2018; BERA, 2024; Alderson and Morrow, 2011).

8.2b Research Limitations

Some key limitations of the present study are outlined in the table below:

Table 15: Research Limitations

• The use of IPA for the focus group analysis yielded a vast amount of data. Whilst much of this was valuable, it was slow and laborious to work with, and at times made maintaining focus on the individual experiences of the young women challenging. This could have been mitigated by reducing the group size.

- Both participating schools were located in sub-urban, predominantly middle-class areas, limiting insight into the effects of socio-economic conditions on the delivery of RSE in Catholic schools.

- The findings may have been shaped by self-selection bias enabled by the elective participation of both the schools and participants.

- Due to time constraints resulting from difficulties in recruitment (see Table 6, p. 99), and the initial intention of working with a large sample of schools (see Appendix A, p. 306), only one focus group with young women was conducted per school. The one-off nature of these sessions potentially precluded more substantive relationship building between myself and the young women, which may have supported more in-depth discussions of their personal experiences. If funding and capacity allow, considering the implications for the scale of data produced, future IPA research could address this issue by conducting multiple focus group sessions with young people over the study duration.

- The individual religious identities of participants were not explored in the teacher interview or focus group within School A. This would have added important contextual framing to their perspectives.

- Due to its small-scale, phenomenological approach, the study is not representative and does not offer insight into the experiences of Catholic RSE on a national scale.

- The research design was not co-produced with young women. Co-production could have further facilitated the aims of bolstering the inclusion of young people's voices in the policy and research landscape surrounding RSE and ensured the research tools met the participants needs (Brady et al, 2023).

8.3 Summary of Findings in Relation to Research Questions.

8.3a RQ 1: *How do Catholic sexual values intersect with statutory RSE requirements in Catholic schools?*

Since 2021, all secondary schools in England have been legally required to provide RSE in accordance with the topics and approach outlined in the 2019 statutory guidance

(Department for Education, 2019a). However, schools 'with a religious character' are permitted to '*teach the distinctive faith perspective on relationships, and balanced debate may take place about issues that are seen as contentious'* (Department for Education, 2019a, p. 12). Schools are mandated to ensure their RSE content accords with the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 and ensure legal rights pertaining to relationships and sexuality are covered (i.e. consent, reproductive rights, same-sex marriage). The findings presented within this thesis demonstrate that both participating schools broadly adhered to the statutory requirements in that RSE was regularly delivered to all pupils and had been significantly updated to reflect the topics covered in the statutory guidance (section 5.5, p. 163). In both schools, RSE delivery was explicitly framed through a Catholic faith perspective, and in School B, was facilitated through the use of externally produced resources (Ten:Ten, n.d, *Secondary school programmes 2024-25*), as permitted by the statutory guidance (Department for Education, 2019a). The teacher participants initially emphasised that the Catholic ethos of their respective schools was not a significant hinderance to their ability to meet statutory requirements (section 5.4, p. 158). Specifically, T1 and T3 viewed Catholic values as a useful framework upon which statutory content could be built, particularly in regard to healthy relationships (section 5.4, p. 154). However, exploration of the teacher and young women's experiences within this thesis suggest that Catholic sexual values may have significantly compromised student access to some of the key 'educational goods' associated with comprehensive relationships and sex education (Wareham, 2024).

Whilst both schools covered LGBTQ+ identities (section 5.4, p. 158; section 5.7, p. 169), many of the young women felt this coverage was tokenistic and insufficiently detailed (section 7.2c and 7.2d, p. 221 onwards). This was substantiated by T1 and T2, who identified limited LGBTQ+ inclusion as a source of professional anxiety (section 5.7, p. 169-170). In School B, 'Pride' content was situated in form-time, outside of RE where the majority of RSE topics were addressed. This reflects the adoption of a pastoral approach to LGBTQ+ inclusivity as a means to avoid tension between Catholic teachings which admonish same-sex relationships, and the equalities responsibilities of modern schools (Whittle and Henry, 2024). In parallel to this, Catholic understandings of marriage as necessarily heterosexual were upheld within both schools' relationships education provision (section 5.4, p. 155;

section 7.4b, p. 250). In failing to meaningfully engage with LGBTQ+ identities, beyond definitions, it is arguable that both schools deprive students of content that would support the educational good of learning how to treat others as equals (Wareham, 2024) and, for queer students such as Ada, deny content that feels relatable and validating (section 7.22d, p. 226). LGBTQ+ inclusion and contraception were identified as key areas for improvement across both schools, however, the role of Catholic values in compounding these gaps was, at times, downplayed by the teacher participants.

The admonition of contraception within Catholic theology resulted in near total omission of the topic in School A and reliance on signposting students to external organisations for this information (sections 7.5a, p. 225; 5.4, p. 155). In School B, contraception education was predominantly facilitated through Ten:Ten resources, which primarily focused on Natural Family Planning and abstinence as the only morally permissible forms of contraception within Catholicism (section 7.3a, p. 237). As such, it is arguable that neither school sufficiently offered 'balanced debate' and necessary medically accurate information (Department for Education, 2019a) around the issue, which may represent a failure of statutory responsibility. In failing to substantively acknowledge Catholic sexual ethics are not the only 'game in town', it is arguable that the RSE delivered in both schools did not adequately facilitate the 'educational good' of equipping young people to make autonomous, accurate decisions about their sexual and reproductive health (Wareham, 2024, p. 137).

Notably, however, the responsibility for ensuring the facilitation of educational goods within RSE is not borne solely by individual schools and staff members. In failing to stipulate *how* faith perspectives and 'contentious' issues should be sensitively and effectively reconciled within RSE, it is arguable that the statutory RSE guidance (Department for Education, 2019a) sets faith schools up to fail. By enabling 'faith-based carve outs' (Wareham, 2022), the DfE have created a policy landscape that legitimises the denial of core educational goods that should emerge from comprehensive RSE delivery. Further, it bears considerations that the teacher participants identified significant structural constraints on RSE delivery, beyond the faith-ethos of their schools, including training availability, disparity in staff competency, time-allocation, and inconsistent delivery in primary schools (sections 5.5 to 5.7, p. 160

onwards). Many of these issues are well-identified barriers to delivery within secular RSE contexts (Dadvand and Cahill, 2021; Cumper et al, 2023). As such, this indicates pervasive, unaddressed gaps in the material conditions surrounding RSE implementation within English schools. Without substantive effort at a policy level to alleviate resourcing and work-pressure constraints on schools, the task of delivering high-quality, relevant RSE for teachers in any schooling context, Catholic or otherwise, remains intractable.

8.3b RQ 2: *What are young women's lived experiences of statutory RSE in Catholic schools?*

Whilst some of the young women in this study reflected that their RSE lessons had been a positive experience and had proactively addressed issues that were important to them (section 7.2f, p. 231-232), the participant's lived experiences of Catholic RSE were broadly defined by a sense of disengagement and unmet needs. Notably, these issues mirror many of the barriers identified within research with young people receiving secular RSE. The girls expressed frustration at oversimplified and unnuanced explanations of key topics (Adams Tucker et al, 2016; Setty, 2023a), and reported feeling disengaged as a result of repetitive content (section 7.2a, p. 214 onwards). Further, the participants often described their RSE lessons as uncomfortable and awkward, compounded by their relationships to their teacher(s) and peers (Allen, 2014; Coll et al, 2018) (section 7.2e, p. 228). Some recognised this as a necessary part of the learning process (Francis, 2016) and recognised the vital role of humour in dispelling discomfort (Dobson et al, 2017; Allen, 2014). Many participants perceived RSE as perpetually delivered *too late* and as poorly matched to their development and life stage (King-Hill, 2024; Ofsted, 2021) (section 7.2d, p. 222). This finding is particularly important considering Conservative efforts to position RSE as 'age-inappropriate' and to introduce age limits on key content (NSCU, 2023; Department for Education, 2024a). Attempts at LGBTQ+ inclusion were broadly understood as tokenistic and driven by heteronormative assumptions, which furthered feelings of alienation experienced by queer pupils (Abbott, Ellis and Abbott, 2015) (sections 7.2c, p. 220, and 7.2d, p. 226). All of these themes speak to the essential role of *relevance* in young peoples' conceptualisations of good quality RSE (Adams Tucker et al, 2016; Coll et al, 2018).

The young women highlighted the necessity of trust and familiarity in those they chose to seek advice on sexuality and relationships from (section 7.4a, p. 246). Whilst mothers and some female teachers were considered trustworthy, fear of judgement and poor responses from adults compounded a reliance on peers, and other modes of self-education as the preferred sources of guidance (Allnock and Atkinson, 2019; Bennet et al, 2017) (section 7.4b, p. 248 onwards). Furthermore, the religious positionality of adults was also constructed as a factor in determining trustworthiness, with clergy and teachers who expressed stringent Catholic values being viewed as inappropriate sources of guidance (sections 7.3b, p. 239 and 7.4b, p. 252). Students relied heavily on social media and other internet sources to fill gaps in their knowledge of sexuality and relationships. For many, social media was perceived as increasing their awareness of different sexual identities and healthy relationships (Renold et al, 2023; Fowler, Schoen and Morain, 2021) (section 7.5b (ii), p. 265). Whilst some participants described implementing their own information verification methods, the lack of reliable resources both online and in real life was constructed as a prominent issue (section 7.5b (ii), p, 267). Many of the young women expressed feelings of anxiety surrounding lack of knowledge, emerging from a prevalent desire to be safe, prepared and informed when they entered relationships, or due to social pressure to appear sexually knowing (section 7.5b (i), p. 260 onwards).

The pupil participants expressed a conflicted relationship to Catholicism, constructing the faith-perspective of their RSE as a compounding factor for the barriers to engagement and impact outlined above. In turn, Catholic sexual values were often constructed as furthering a sense of disconnect between their lived experiences, and the RSE they received. The participants constructed Catholicism as an authoritative and often unquestioned voice within their RSE provision, which they felt further reduced its relevance for those of no or other faiths within the school (section 7.3a and 7.3b, p. 233 onwards). Many participants reflected a desire for either more religious plurality, or no religion at all within RSE provision. This desire built upon an understanding of religious belief as something deeply personal and shaped by multiple social factors. The girls broadly rejected the Church's stance on LGBTQ+ identities (section 6.3a, p. 184) and some felt the silence around these 'tricky' teachings was highly incompatible with good quality, inclusive RSE (Whittle and Henry, 2024) (section 7.3b, p. 239). Many expressed feeling the marital focus of Catholic RSE

was extremely unrelatable and lacked application to their current life stage. Further the situation of marriage as the only permissible context for sex, was perceived as unattainable and out of touch with young peoples' lives – even for those who identified as Catholic (Maher et al, 2007; Huygen, 2020) (sections 7.2d, p. 224 and 7.3b, p. 243)

8.3c RQ 3 *Does RSE delivered in Catholic schools reflect and meet the current needs of young women in England?*

Whilst the research presented in this thesis does not provide a generalisable insight into the overarching efficacy of Catholic RSE in England, the findings clearly demonstrate that the RSE delivery across both participating schools persistently failed to address the young women's needs and experiences. The pupil participants reflected a strong desire to feel prepared to support both themselves and their friends to safely navigate relationships, sexuality, and mental health (section 7.5b (i), p. 260). However, as the conclusions drawn in sections 8.3a and 8.3b illustrate, significant barriers precluded this desire from being fulfilled within their RSE lessons. The failure to reflect and meet young women's needs is most clearly articulated in the persistent absence of RSE content that felt relevant to them (section 7.2d, p. 222) and the subsequent feelings of disengagement the participants expressed towards their RSE lessons (Adams Tucker et al, 2016) (section 7.2a, p. 214) . Whilst the themes of disengagement and alienation speak to broader failings in the design and delivery of many iterations of RSE (Coll et al, 2018; Adams Tucker et al, 2016; Setty, 2023a), the Catholic lens of RSE delivery may have compounded some of the prevalent issues. Specifically, the focus on Catholic marital values, heteronormativity, and conservative Catholic sexual ethics, including the prohibition of contraception and LGBTQ+ identities, within Catholic RSE resources appeared to further feelings of unattainability, unrelatability and alienation for many of the participants (section 7.3b, p. 239 onwards).

Overall, in failing to adequately reflect and address the young women's identities and experiences, the RSE content across both schools was rendered broadly unapplicable to their navigation of the fraught sexual landscapes established in Chapter 6 (p. 177). The consequence of insufficient support in these areas contributed to the prevalent themes of anxiety and loneliness that resulted from feeling ill-prepared and unknowing (section 7.5a (ii), p. 257). This theme was exacerbated by broad mistrust of adults as advisors in this area,

owing to the fear of poor and judgemental responses from teachers and parents alike (section 7.4b, p. 249). In turn, young women heavily relied on self-education, leaning on information provided by friends or found online or through lived experience (section 7.5b (ii), p. 262). Whilst social media was recognised as a valuable learning tool, particularly surrounding LGBTQ+ identities and healthy relationships (Renold et al, 2023), participants also highlighted notable issues in the reliability and appropriateness of online sources (section 7.5b (ii), p. 267).

In conclusion, the statutory guidance highlights the need for RSE delivery to feel relevant to pupils' lives (Department for Education, 2019a) which was not consistently reflected in either school. However, based on the experiences and policy analysis reflected in this thesis, it is arguable that the Department for Education have not facilitated policy conditions that make this possible, particularly in the case of faith schools. This is due to the prevalent failings in youth consultation during the statutory policy design (Setty and Dobson, 2023), and the allowance of faith-driven, rather than faith and student sensitive, RSE approaches (Wareham, 2024).

8.3d RQ 4 *How do the experiences of staff delivering RSE in Catholic schools collude or contrast with young women's experiences?*

Teachers recognised some aspects of the 'fraught sexual landscapes' surrounding young women's experiences of RSE. In particular, T1 and T3 shared concern surrounding VAWG and the street safety of young women, situating the issue as a primary motivation for their own involvement in RSE delivery (section 5.2, p. 141). This speaks to the 'moment of reckoning' (Topping, 2022), post-Sarah Everard and Everyone's Invited, within which the study was situated. In School A, both T1 and the young women highlighted a 'laddy' culture of sexism and harassment within the school that required intervention (sections 5.7, p. 172 and 6.2, p. 179). However, the scale and normalisation of this behaviour both online and in school, as reflected in the young women's experiences, was more significant than T1 perceived. Many of the young women reflected fears of physical and social consequences associated with sexual behaviour. This rhetoric was substantiated within T2 and T3's construction of 'good' decision making and awareness of consequences as key outcomes for RSE delivery (section 5.2, p. 144). This arguably speaks to the dominance of risk-driven

approaches to sexual health and the imbedded nature of 'informed decision maker' pedagogies within RSE, as explored in section 2.4 (p. 26 onwards) (Shoveller and Johnson, 2006; Jones, 2011).

T2's construction of her partners unwillingness to discuss 'woman stuff' colluded with the girls' frustration at the lack of empathy and understanding from their male peers (section 5.2, p. 141; section 6.4a, p. 194). Both emphasised a need for better menstrual and sexual violence education for young men. The young women spoke confidently and sensitively about gender and sexual diversity, the need for LGBTQ+ inclusive RSE, and the prevalence of homophobia in society (section 6.3a, p. 183 onwards). This juxtaposes T1 and T2's experiences who, despite emphasising their allyship, identified LGBTQ+ inclusion as an area of practice in which they lacked knowledge and confidence (section 5.7, pp. 169-170). Notably, the young women spoke extensively about socio-sexual pressures surrounding their experiences of gender, sexuality and relationships (section 6.5, p. 201 onwards), a theme which was notably absent from the teacher accounts. Overall, whilst the teacher participants are subject to many of the same social structures of gender and sexuality, and may understand some of the key issues facing young women, this does not necessarily inform RSE delivery that meets and reflects young people's needs. This is exemplified by the conclusions drawn in sections 8.3b and 8.3c.

Significant gaps emerged between student and teacher experiences of the RSE lessons and content within both schools. Across both schools, the young women and teachers acknowledged that COVID-19 had significantly altered the experience of RSE. However, the teachers broadly framed this impact around changes in student learning engagement and behaviour (Timmins, 2021) (section 5.3, p. 144), whereas pupils emphasised disruption and delays to content delivered within their RSE lessons, which furthered feelings of the content being mismatched to their life-stage (Horan et al, 2023) (section 7.2b, p. 220). Notably differences emerged between student and teacher expectations of classroom conduct within RSE lessons. T2 perceived pupils to be resistant and unwilling to engage in challenging conversations within RSE (section 5.3, p. 150), which stood contrary to the young women's desire to embrace complexity and nuance within the classroom (Adams Tucker et al, 2016; Setty, 2023a) (section 7.2a, p. 214). In fact, some pupils shared T2's view

of some level of discomfort as a potentially necessary part of the learning process within RSE (Francis, 2016). Building on this, some of the young women constructed humour as an inevitable and sometimes useful response to tackling uncomfortable and/or taboo topics in the classroom (Allen, 2014) (section 7.2e, p. 229). Whilst this was recognised by staff, some reflected a need to curtail and manage 'over the top' behaviours, which is argued to potentially shut down communication with students (Dobson et al, 2017) (section 5.3, p. 148). This reflects the emotionally laden task of RSE delivery, whereby teachers need to manage their own boundaries whilst maintaining student engagement (Francis, 2016). Some of the young women in School B shared T2's construction of teachers sharing personal experiences as inappropriate within RSE (sections 5.5, p. 164; 7.2a, p. 215). However, the majority of students across both schools also reflected a desire to learn from others' experiences within RSE, which stands in tension with the strictly boundaried approach adopted by T1 and T2. Finally, all of the teachers constructed RSE and speaking to adults as the 'safest' means for young people to learn about sex and relationships, constructed student's use of online information as highly risky (section 5.3, p. 145). However, students across both groups reflected a significant degree of mistrust of adults (teachers and family) in providing advice on sex and relationships due to fear of judgement, inappropriate responses, and potential punishment (Allnock and Atkinson, 2019) (section 7.4b, p. 249). In turn, students largely relied on self-education, and their own methods information verification to fill gaps in RSE provision (section 7.5b, p. 260).

Both the young women and teachers exhibited conflicted relationships to the Catholicism and the Catholic ethos of their school. All three teachers constructed Catholicism, and gospel values as useful framework for RSE (section 5.4, p. 154), which contrasts the young women's desire for either more religious plurality, or 'unbiased' secular delivery (section 7.3b, p. 239). Teachers and students who identified as Catholic reflected significant dissent from the conservative sexual ethics of the Catholic Church – particularly around LGBTQ+ inclusion and marriage (sections 5.4 and 7.3b). This echoes consistent findings that suggest young, more socially liberal Catholics do not rely on the Church to inform their views on sexuality and gender (Maher et al, 2007; Huygens, 2020). Notably, tension between the conservative Catholic messaging of RSE resources used (such as Ten:Ten) and personal values and identity was identified as a key source of professional anxiety and stress for T2

(section 5.4, p. 156). Whilst teachers acknowledged LGBTQ+ inclusion as an area for improvement within both schools' RSE provision, only T1 identified Catholic teachings as a potential barrier to this (section 5.4, p. 155). T3 in particular constructed School B as an exception to the rule in terms of delivering inclusive RSE through a Catholic lens (section 5.4, p. 158). However, students across both schools identified Catholicism as precluding effective LGBTQ+ inclusion (sections 7.2c, 7.3b). Ada's reflections as a queer student in School B indicate that the coverage of LGBTQ+ identities was often tokenistic and 'awareness' based. Further the school did not engage with the dissonance between 'tricky' Catholic teachings and LGBTQ+ inclusion (Whittle and Henry, 2024). In turn, Ada reflected feelings of alienation and disengagement from RSE which assumed heterosexuality as the default position (Abbott, Ellis and Abbott, 2015) (section 7.2d, p. 226). T1 also shared the young women's concerns around the 'unspoken' nature of contraception within School A's RSE provision, which appeared to be a further source of professional anxiety due to reliance on signposting to other services (section 5.4, p. 155).

8.4 Recommendations for policy, practice and research

Table 16: Recommendations for Policy, Practice and Research

Recommendations for Education Policy
• The participants reflected a significant disconnect between the approach and content of RSE, and their lived experiences. Future reviews of statutory RSE should adopt more robust and meaningful approaches to youth consultations, with a view to fulfilling UNCRC Article 12 responsibilities. This must include sufficient space, voice, audience and influence (Lundy, 2007) in order to prevent tokenism. This should include, as a minimum, the provision of adapted draft guidance documents and questionnaires for younger children, and the direct solicitation of youth perspectives. For instance, distributing the consultation via schools to pupils or holding youth focus groups. • RSE design and guidance must be evidence-led and draw on existing research with children and young people. It must reflect the actual experiences, perceptions and knowledge of young people in relation to sexuality, gender, and relationships, not the levels of knowledge and experience we as adults deem permissible. • The new Labour government should heed expertise from third-sector organisations and RSE researchers (Whittaker, 2024) and rescind the 2024 draft RSE guidance (Department for Education, 2024b). Specifically, the proposed introduction of age-limits on RSE content must be urgently removed from the draft RSE guidance (Department for Education, 2024b). Young people, including the participants in this study, have continuously reflected that RSE is already delivered too late (King-Hill, 2024; Ofsted, 2021) and this change will

only further the problem. Beginning the RSE review from 'scratch' would also create opportunity for meaningful youth consultation (Lundy, 2007) and co-production of the updated guidance content (Brady et al, 2023).

• The RSE guidance should be updated to include specific reference to the necessary 'structures for care' schools should put in place to support staff delivering RSE (Dadvand and Cahill, 2021). This speaks to the centrality of staff confidence and comfort in young people's conceptualisations of 'good' RSE (Coll et al, 2018; Lodge et al, 2022). This could include guidance around supportive team structures and training provision for those delivering RSE.

• The allowance of RSE delivered from 'distinct faith perspectives' should be removed from statutory guidance. Instead, England should follow suite from other European countries and advocate for 'objective, critical, and pluralistic' approaches (Dojan and Others v. Germany, 2011). This should be combined with explicit reference to the need for faith-sensitive approaches and guidance on how to explore religious perspectives in way that supports students of all and no faiths (Phillips et al, 2023; Sell and Reiss, 2021). Comprehensive training on faith-sensitive approaches should be offered as part of ITE within PGCE provision, or through centralised, free of cost CPD offered by the Department of Education.

• Teachers should have access to evidence informed CPD opportunities before delivering RSE. They should be encouraged to reflect on their personal experiences of gender, relationships, and sexuality and how this may inform their professional practice. Training should include exploration of 'triggers' for teachers within RSE and how these can be managed in safe way for students and staff alike (Francis, 2016). This could be provided through ITE by situating it as a mandatory part of PGCE courses or provided free of cost by the Department for Education in a centralised format.

Recommendations for RSE Practice and Implementation

• Schools should adopt a collective approach to RSE leadership, designating a team rather than having one sole member of staff who is responsible for the whole program. This facilitates 'structures for care' around staff delivering RSE, but also enables collective problem solving around tricky subject areas (Dadvand and Cahill, 2021).

• Catholic schools must create space to acknowledge and explore tension between Catholic sexual values, and key RSE topics, namely LGBTQ+ inclusion and reproductive rights. Pastoral and awareness approaches to LGBTQ+ identities that fail to acknowledge challenging areas of Catholic teaching (Whittle and Henry, 2024) result in a sense of dissonance that may further alienation and othering felt by queer students. This may be facilitated through the adoption of faith-sensitive approaches (Phillips et al, 2023) and the exploration of alternate religious perspectives, including queer theologies withing RE and RSE (Henry, 2024).

• Youth consultation and co-production must be substantively built into the school approaches to RSE design and implementation, to build on the role of student voice as catalyst for positive change.

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Recommendations for Further Research

• Further work is needed to ascertain the feasibility and impact of faith-sensitive approaches to RSE in faith schools. This could involve the co-production of faith sensitive RSE lesson plans and materials with students, teachers, and parents, as demonstrated by Phillips et al (2023). A qualitative feasibility trial could then be implemented across differing faith school contexts. It is acknowledged that this may be particularly challenging to trial in Catholic schools, due to the role of dioceses and the CES in overseeing and monitoring RSE provision.

• A comparative study examining experiences of statutory RSE across Catholic and secular school contexts would enable better insight into the impact of 'faith based carve outs' (Wareham, 2022) on the capacity for RSE to meet young women's needs.

• Future IPA, focus group research with young people surrounding sexuality and gender should aim to conduct multiple sessions of data collection with the aim of gradual relationship building to examine whether this would better support the revelation of experiential data. This would also have to take the production and analysis of an extremely large dataset into account, with regard to funding and time-allocation.

• The experiences of staff delivering RSE in Catholic schools also remain scantly explored, and little national-scale evidence exists. A survey distributed through teaching unions or other nationally representative professional bodies could provide representative insight into the perceptions and experiences of staff delivering Catholic RSE.

• Larger scale research is needed to provide a more representative and generalisable account of young women's experience of Catholic RSE nationally. This could be facilitated through nationally distributed survey.

• Young men's experiences of Catholic RSE remain unexplored in England. A similar, in-depth phenomenological study could provide a useful comparison point to this study, examining the impact of Catholic sexual values on how young men perceive and enact gender and sexuality.

8.5 Personal Reflections and Concluding Remarks

> *'I think people see it and they think, God, you can't teach sex education in a Catholic school' (T1, p. 155)*

In the title quote of this thesis, T1 reflects on external perceptions of Catholicism and sex education as mutually exclusive concepts. Having completed this research, I agree with her rejection of this preconception. However, it now appears to me that the more revelatory

question is *how,* not *whether* RSE is taught within Catholic contexts. My most pressing take-away from this research is that how we, as adults, educators, policymakers, and researchers talk about adolescent sexuality matters. As the young women in this study highlighted, to not know and to feel crucial information is withheld from you is disempowering and lonely. The pervasiveness of this theme across the participant accounts will stay with me for a long time. As such, adherence to the statutory RSE requirements and mandated topics alone is simply not sufficient. Young women deserve RSE that directly engages with their hopes, fears, and needs – as defined in their own terms. This has not been facilitated by the existing policy landscape surrounding RSE in English faith schools. It is my view that, whilst the distinctive Catholic perspective of the RSE explored in this thesis was not the sole *cause* of failures to meet and reflect pupils' needs, the allowance of faith-driven RSE has furthered the gulf between young women's lived experiences and worldview, and the sex and relationships information provided to them.

It is my hope that this thesis and the recommendations emerging from it contribute to RSE policy and practice in Catholic schools (and beyond) that better serves the interests and well-being of young women and their teachers alike. Whilst I strongly feel that the exploration of faith-sensitive approaches and more opportunities for meaningful youth consultation could improve student experiences, I do not presently feel optimistic about the possibilities of these changes in the current political landscape. While the new government presents opportunity for change, young people's right to sexuality and gender information and expression has become politically contested in ways that make me deeply fearful. Two key findings within this thesis offer me some hope. First, the RSE teachers I spoke to wanted to make a difference within RSE, even in the face of significant personal and structural obstacles and demonstrated significant willingness to be led by students in evoking this change. Second, the young women spoke confidently and sensitively about what they wanted and needed from RSE, in ways that would not have been fathomable when I was their age. Going forward, I will continue to advocate for RSE research and policy that centres these voices and experiences.

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Appendix A – Ethics Application

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Application for Ethics Review Form

Guidance Notes:

What is the purpose of this form?

This form should be completed to seek ethics review for research projects to be undertaken by University of Birmingham staff, PGR students or visiting/emeritus researchers who will be carrying out research which will be attributed to the University.

Who should complete it?

For a staff project – the lead researcher/Principal Investigator on the project.
For a PGR student project – the student's academic supervisor, in discussion with the student.

Students undertaking undergraduate projects and taught postgraduate (PGT) students should refer to their Department/School for advice

When should it be completed?

After you have completed the University's online ethics self-assessment form (SAF), **IF** the SAF indicates that ethics review is required. You should apply in good time to ensure that you receive a favourable ethics opinion prior to the commencement of the project and it is recommended that you allow at least 60 working days for the ethics process to be completed.

How should it be submitted?

An electronic version of the completed form should be submitted to the Research Ethics Officer, at the following email address: aer-ethics@contacts.bham.ac.uk.

What should be included with it?

Copies of any relevant supporting information and participant documentation, research tools (e.g. interview topic guides, questionnaires, etc) and where appropriate a health & safety risk assessment for the project (see section 10 of this form for further information about risk assessments).

What should applicants read before submitting this form?

Before submitting, you should ensure that you have read and understood the following information and guidance and that you have taken it into account when completing your application:

The information and guidance provided on the University's ethics webpages (https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/finance/accounting/Research-Support-Group/Research-Ethics/Ethical-Review-of-Research.aspx)

The University's Code of Practice for Research (https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/university/legal/research.pdf)

The guidance on Data Protection for researchers provided by the University's Legal Services team at https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/legal-services/What-we-do/Data-Protection/resources.aspx.

Section 1: Basic Project Details

Project Title: Beyond 'Good Catholic Girls': Exploring the Role of Statutory RSE in Catholic schools within Young Women's Constructions of Sexual Agency

Is this project a:

University of Birmingham Staff Research project ☐
University of Birmingham Postgraduate Research (PGR) Student project ☒
Other (Please specify below) ☐
Click or tap here to enter text.

Details of the Principal Investigator or Lead Supervisor (for PGR student projects):

Title: Dr
First name: Shelley
Last name: Budgeon

Position held: Senior Lecturer
School/Department Social Policy, Sociology and Criminology

Telephone: [redacted]
Email address: [redacted]

Details of any Co-Investigators or Co-Supervisors (for PGR student projects):

Title: Dr
First name: Sarah
Last name: Hall

Position held: Senior Lecturer
School/Department Education

Telephone: [redacted]
Email address: [redacted]

Details of the student for PGR student projects:

Title: Miss
First name: Abby
Last name: Gilsenan

Course of study: PhD Social Policy, Sociology and Criminology
Email address: [redacted]

Project start and end dates:

Estimated start date of project: 01/03/2021
Estimated end date of project: 30/07/2021

Funding:

Sources of funding: ESRC studentship from Oct 2020

Section 2: Summary of Project

Describe the purpose, background rationale for the proposed project, as well as the hypotheses/research questions to be examined and expected outcomes. This description should be in everyday language that is free from jargon - please explain any technical terms or discipline-specific phrases. Please do not provide extensive academic background material or references.

My research examines the impact of new statutory Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) policy within Catholic on the lives and experiences of young women. The 21st century has seen exponential change in the socio-political positioning of young women. Sex education is increasingly recognised as an essential component of policy initiatives designed to uphold the health, wellbeing and prosperity of young women globally. From September 2020, faith schools in England will, for the first time, be mandated to provide statutory RSE to all secondary level pupils. However, at a time where conservative religious groups, including the Catholic Church, have expressed opposition to the introduction of 'progressive' sex education models, the ability of Catholic schools in England to meet these overarching RSE policy aims becomes a timely empirical question.

This work bridges appraisal of the implementation of new statutory RSE measures within Catholic schools with critical analysis of the construction and understanding of girlhood within broader sex education policy discourse. Sex Education policy in England has levied significant sociological criticism, particularly from feminist scholars who suggest that sex education can uphold harmful norms of gender, class and race. As such, the introduction of statutory RSE within faith schools sees the socio-economic positioning of secular RSE intersected with theological perspectives on sexuality. Sex education *can* offer a significant form of support for young women as they navigate sexual d, allowing them to make safe, informed and active sexual choices. However, the impact of current and developing RSE policy content within English Catholic schools on young women's lives remains unknown. By

developing a policy analysis of statutory RSE that centralises the voices of young women, my work provides a timely assessment as to the lived impact of contemporary Catholic sex education.

Reflecting the 2019 Ofsted Education Inspection framework, this research uses an interdisciplinary approach to assess the **intent**, **implementation** and **impact** of RSE in Catholic schools in England. This work therefore poses the following research questions:

> What are the dominant discourses present in Catholic RSE delivery?
>
> Does the implementation of RSE policy in Catholic schools reflect global policy aims of sex education as a tool of empowerment for young women?
>
> To what extent does the delivery of RSE policy in Catholic schools shape young women's experiences and identities?

Section 3: Conduct and location of Project

Conduct of project

Please give a description of the research methodology that will be used. If more than one methodology or phase will be involved, please separate these out clearly and refer to them consistently throughout the rest of this form.

This project seeks rich, phenomenological data and employs in-depth qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. The study comprises of two phases, the initial phase involving naturalistic classroom observations of RSE lessons and the second centering on one-to-one interviews with pupils. The study aims to cover up to five schools under the Birmingham diocese, obtaining 1 classroom observation and <5 interviews with young women in each school. Due to the on-going COVID-19 crisis, the research design for this project raises a number of significant logistical and ethical questions. As this study relies heavily on negotiation with schools and creating a research design that is safe for all parties, a high degree of flexibility is required. The researcher will begin consultations with schools to assess with methodologies would best be applied in order to collect data, however, the situation with schools and COVID-19 is of course subject to change if the virus in the UK worsens. As such, I will present a multi-clause research design to account for possible scenarios. Fundamentally, the ethical implications of the project should remain largely similarly as the topic, research questions, interview style and participants will remain the same. However, the format of data collection may have to adapt to fit the situational requirements at the time. Option A: (Will only be employed if approved by Gatekeepers and providing that the COVID situation is the same/improved from this point). Phase one (Classroom observation of RSE lesson) of the study will be completed virtually to save unnecessary contact with class. This may be done via a video-conferencing platform such as Zoom or Skype, or could request a pre-recorded video of the RSE lesson. This will be negotiated with gatekeepers and senior school staff. Virtual observations are an established

part of current school monitoring practices and have also been employed during teacher training contexts. As such, this method is likely less obtrusive conducting the observation in person, as such potentially yielding richer data and significantly reduces COVID transmission risk. The lesson will be transcribed and fieldnotes will be produced detailing the conduct, content, pupil engagement and behavior during the lesson. Phase two (Interviews), if approved by the school and parents of participants, will be conducted face-to-face whilst employing COVID secure methods in line with school policy (including social distancing and PPE where required). The interviews will use a semi-structured format to ensure all research questions are addressed whilst allowing the participants freedom to discuss the topics at will and at a length that suits them. This would enable the preservation of the interpersonal advantages of face-to-face qualitative research. The interviews will be recorded using a digital voice recorded and later transcribed. Option B: Phase one remains the same as Option A and will be conducted via a virtual medium which will be negotiated with gatekeepers at the school. Phase two, however, will also be facilitated via a virtual medium such as Zoom or Microsoft teams, allowing the participants to take part outside of school time from home (provided they have private space and access to a device). The semi-structured format and topic guide for the interview would remain as in Option A. The interviews will be recorded via the platform used and then transcribed. Option C would be exercised exactly as above yet the pupils would participate in interviews whilst on school property using school computers. This would be in the case that participants do not have access to a safe space at home or to an electronic device, or in the case that the school deem online interviews to be problematic. All options will be discussed at length with Gatekeepers and re-assessed in light of COVID-19 safety measures and policy as the situation develops. Notably, the interview topic guide will be piloted in the spring with a small group of young women within a local Birmingham school to ensure that the topic area and question style is accessible to an adolescent age group. The same options of conduct will apply to this pilot and will similarly be negotiated with gatekeepers and school leads. The same methods of analysis will be used regardless of which data collection option is implemented. All of the fieldnotes and transcriptions will be thematically coded, drawing on the Listening Guide Method which seeks to identify the various 'voices' presented by participants when discussing contentious issues such as sexuality. This involves a three-stage process of coding the transcriptions, looking for a difference 'voice' each time. To aid this process, I will use NVivo software to develop digitally accessible visualizations of the coding

Geographic location of project

State the geographic locations where the project and all associated fieldwork will be carried out. If the project will involve travel to areas which may be considered unsafe, either in the UK or overseas, please ensure that the risks of this (or any other non-trivial health and safety risks associated with the research) are addressed by a documented health and safety risk assessment, as described in section 10 of this form.

This project will involve schools under the Birmingham Catholic Diocese. The Birmingham diocese covers a significant proportion of the West Midlands, Staffordshire and Oxfordshire.

The exact location of the participating schools will not be known until after the recruitment stage.

Section 4: Research Participants and Recruitment

Does the project involve human participants?

Note: 'Participation' includes both active participation (such as when participants take part in an interview) and cases where participants take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time (for example, in crowd behaviour research).

Yes ☒
No ☐

If you have answered NO please go on to Section 8 of this form. If you have answered YES please complete the rest of this section and then continue on to section 5.

Who will the participants be?

Describe the number of participants and important characteristics (such as age, gender, location, affiliation, level of fitness, intellectual ability etc.). Specify any inclusion/exclusion criteria to be used.

The participants for the project will be twenty-five (n<25) young women across five (n<5) Catholic secondary schools under the Birmingham diocese. They will be within Key stage 4, which ranges from Year Ten to Year Eleven, therefore will be between 14 and 16 years old. The principal inclusion criteria are a) identifying as female; b) attending a Catholic secondary school; c) receiving RSE lessons. As the socio-economic positions of the schools themselves will vary, the participants will be from a range of socio-economic, ethnic and religious backgrounds.

How will the participants be recruited?

Please state clearly how the participants will be identified, approached and recruited. Include any relationship between the investigator(s) and participant(s) (e.g. instructor-student). Please ensure that you attach a copy of any poster(s), advertisement(s) or letter(s) to be used for recruitment.

This project necessitates two phases of recruitment. Initially, participating schools must be identified by discussing the project with schools PSHE leads, who fundamentally will act as gatekeepers to the young women receiving Catholic RSE. Gatekeepers will be identified via pre-established school contacts from my MRes project, connections made available by my secondary thesis supervisor who is based in Teacher Education and social media recruitment. Additionally, preliminary phone and email contact will be made with other secondary schools under the Birmingham Diocese jurisdiction. Once PSHE leads have been identified, they will be provided will comprehensive information packs detailing the aims, methods and intended outcomes of the study in order to gauge interest in the project. The

PSHE leads will identify a class they feel is suitable for observation and working in consultation with the schools, a consent procedure will be implemented to obtain full parental and pupil consent to take part in said observation. I will provide further information packs for pupils, detailing the project conduct and aims, based on which pupils who meet the inclusion may voluntarily elect to take part in the interview phase of the study. Based on pupil interest, further parental consent will be obtained prior to conducting the interviews. This procedure will be repeated in each participating school. Once some pupils in each school have been recruited, a degree of snowball sampling can be implemented to obtain further interviews with other young women in their peer groups/classes.

Section 5: Consent

What process will be used to obtain consent?

Describe the process that the investigator(s) will be using to obtain valid consent. If consent is not to be obtained explain why. If the participants are under the age of 16 it would usually be necessary to obtain parental consent and the process for this should be described in full, including whether parental consent will be opt-in or opt-out.

Consent will be obtained from the PSHE lead/teacher, pupils and parents for every stage of the data collection process. Full information sheets about the overall project will provided to the PSHE lead initially and following the school consenting to participate, both parents and pupils will receive detailed information letters about the aims, data collection methods, confidentiality procedures, data storage, safeguarding measures and withdrawal process of the project. Opt-in pupil consent will be required before pupils can engage in the study, however, parental consent will be opt-out prior to the interviews and observations being conducted if they wish to withdraw their child from the study.
Consent will be obtained from the pupils and parents for every stage of the data collection process. Full information sheets about the overall project will provided to the PSHE lead initially and following the school consenting to participate, both parents and pupils will receive detailed information letters about the purpose

Please be aware that if the project involves over 16s who lack capacity to consent, separate approval will be required from the Health Research Authority (HRA) in line with the Mental Capacity Act.

Please attach a copy of the Participant Information Sheet (if applicable), the Consent Form (if applicable), the content of any telephone script (if applicable) and any other material that will be used in the consent process.

Note: Guidance from Legal Services on wording relating to the Data Protection Act 2018 can be accessed at https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/legal-services/What-we-do/Data-Protection/resources.aspx.

Use of deception?

Will the participants be deceived in any way about the purpose of the study?

Yes ☐
No ☒

If yes, please describe the nature and extent of the deception involved. Include how and when the deception will be revealed, and the nature of any explanation/debrief will be provided to the participants after the study has taken place.

Click or tap here to enter text.

Section 6: Participant compensation, withdrawal and feedback to participants

What, if any, feedback will be provided to participants?

Explain any feedback/ information that will be provided to the participants after participation in the research (e.g. a more complete description of the purpose of the research, or access to the results of the research).

Following the analysis of data, participants and participating schools will be offered feedback in the form of an accessible, preliminary report of findings. This will include pseudonymised data only. This may include excerpts of interviews, a write up of the qualitative findings and tables/figures that present the initial stages of thematic analysis. The reports offered to PSHE leads and school senior leadership will include preliminary recommendations for practice and implications pertaining to policy implementation which may not be accessible for the participants themselves.

What arrangements will be in place for participant withdrawal?

Describe how the participants will be informed of their right to withdraw from the project, explain any consequences for the participant of withdrawing from the study and indicate what will be done with the participant's data if they withdraw.

Participants will be informed of how to withdraw via the comprehensive information and consent forms provided to them and via email before taking part in the study. The information sheet and consent form highlight the participant's right to withdraw from the study and that any data or personal details they have provided to the researcher will be destroyed in accordance with the University of Birmingham data management guidance and the British Educational Research Association guidance on education research data storage. As part of the consent form, participants will be asked whether they understand their right to and the procedure to withdraw from the study.

Please confirm the specific date/timescale to be used as the deadline for participant withdrawal and ensure that this is consistently stated across all participant documentation. This is considered preferable to allowing participants to 'withdraw at any time' as

presumably there will be a point beyond which it will not be possible to remove their data from the study (e.g. because analysis has started, the findings have been published, etc).

The deadline for participant withdrawal will be June 2021 as after this point write up of analysis and meta-analysis of the transcripts will be in the final stages therefore making it difficult to remove data after this point. This also allows for time to conduct further new interviews if the missing data serves to hinder the findings of the project.

What arrangements will be in place for participant compensation?

Will participants receive compensation for participation?

Yes ☐
No ☒

If yes, please provide further information about the nature and value of any compensation and clarify whether it will be financial or non-financial.

Click or tap here to enter text.

If participants choose to withdraw, how will you deal with compensation?

Click or tap here to enter text.

Section 7: Confidentiality/anonymity

Will the identity of the participants be known to the researcher?

Will participants be truly anonymous (i.e. their identity will not be known to the researcher)?

Yes ☐
No ☒

In what format will data be stored?

Will participants' data be stored in identifiable format, or will it be anonymised or pseudo-anonymised (i.e. an assigned ID code or number will be used instead of the participant's name and a key will kept allowing the researcher to identify a participant's data)?

A lettering and numbering system of pseudonyms will be used to maintain the confidentiality of participating institutions and young women. As this data is sensitive, only de-identified data will be deposited to the University E-Data repository, therefore no raw, identifiable data will be retained.
The key for pseudonymization will not be deposited and participants will be contacted prior to the data being deposited, allowing data to be withdraw if they wish.

Will participants' data be treated as confidential?

Will participants' data be treated as confidential (i.e. they will not be identified in any outputs from the study and their identity will not be disclosed to any third party)?

Yes ☒
No ☐

If you have answered no to the question above, meaning that participants' data will not be treated as confidential (i.e. their data and/or identities may be revealed in the research outputs or otherwise to third parties), please provide further information and justification for this:

Click or tap here to enter text.

Section 8: Storage, access and disposal of data

How and where will the data (both paper and electronic) be stored, what arrangements will be in place to keep it secure and who will have access to it?

Please note that for long-term storage, data should usually be held on a secure University of Birmingham IT system, for example BEAR (see https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/it/teams/infrastructure/research/bear/index.aspx).

The data (field notes from observations, interview audio files and transcripts) will be stored in separate encrypted folders on the PGR's laptop. The PGR will not use cloud storage as this is not compliant with the storage of sensitive data under the UK GDPR guidelines (2018). These will be backed up onto the university's BEAR data store as this allows for flexibility across working digital devices (PGR laptop, University office computer, mobile phone). Data will be backed up every time it is recorded and edited. Only the PGR will have access to this raw data.

The PGR will implement a consistent system of file naming and storage the start of the study. Different secure folders on her laptop will be used for interview transcripts, field notes and audio recordings. A clear system of pseudonymization will be used to maintain confidentiality of participants and schools in the study. The key of pseudonymization will be accessible via password only by the PGR in case any participants wish to withdraw from the study, allowing their data to be erased in that situation. Copies of covers sheets from the interviews, detailing proof of consent will also be complied into the anonymised transcripts.
The file naming system will be simple and detail the pseudonym code for both participant and school, alongside the date. Field-notes from classroom observations will be named according to school pseudonym and date. This allows for chronological organisation within secure folders for easily accessible data during analysis. The pseudomised transcripts will be analysed using NVivo software, and a master file of the analysed and coded transcripts will be backed up onto the University's BEAR data store.
The de-identified data will be achieved using the University of Birmingham E-data repository in order to be used for potential publication in the future.

Data retention and disposal

The University usually requires data to be held for a minimum of 10 years to allow for verification. Will you retain your data for at least 10 years?

Yes ☒
No ☐

If data will be held for less than 10 years, please provide further justification:

Click or tap here to enter text.

What arrangements will be in place for the secure disposal of data?

In the event of withdrawal from the study or a need to dispose of data from this research, the researcher will use secure data disposal software to wipe retained data from personal devices. Appropriate measures will be undertaken to ensure data is also wiped from BEAR data store and any other university data archives used.

Section 9: Other approvals required

Are you aware of any other national or local approvals required to carry out this research?

E.g. clearance from the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS), Local Authority approval for work involving Social Care, local ethics/governance approvals if the work will be carried out overseas, or approval from NOMS or HMPPS for work involving police or prisons? If so, please provide further details:

Yes, for all school based research or research involving vulnerable or young people, a full DBS check is required. I am in receipt of an extended DBS check certificate facilitated by the University of Birmingham and schools will be informed.

For projects involving NHS staff, is approval from the Health Research Authority (HRA) needed in addition to University ethics approval?

If your project will involve NHS staff, please go to the HRA decision tool at http://www.hra-decisiontools.org.uk/research/ to establish whether the NHS would consider your project to be research, thus requiring HRA approval in addition to University ethics approval. Is HRA approval required?

Yes ☐
No ☒

Please include a print out of the HRA decision tool outcome with your application.

Section 10: Risks and benefits/significance

Benefits/significance of the research

This study provides a timely assessment of new RSE policy and its implementation during a turbulent period for English schooling. Recent years have seen mounting tension between conservative faith groups and progressive sex education initiatives, as seen in Birmingham with the 'No Outsider's' controversy. With faith schools included in the provision of statutory RSE for the first time in September 2020, the mandatory provision of sex education in Catholic schools marks new territory for both schools and pupils. This research provides pivotal insight into how statutory Relationships and Sex Education intersects with Catholic ideology and, in turn, shapes the lives and experience of young women receiving Catholic education.

This research breaks new ground in centring the voices of young women in sex education policy evaluation. Sex Education is recognised as a foundational aspect of initiatives designed to bolster the economic and social opportunity and health of women worldwide. Sexual health and agency hold an enormous role in shaping the material conditions of women's lives, as such, getting sex education right during adolescence is paramount for young women to thrive in society. With this in mind, this project seeks to evaluate not only if Catholic schools are meeting broader policy aims for statutory RSE, but also if the implementation of this policy meets the needs of young women in the 21st century. For many young women, especially those from marginalised groups, the discussion of sexuality is taboo, repressed and challenging. This study fundamentally aims to provide a non-judgemental space for young women to discuss how they perceive, relate to and understand sexuality. The methodology of the project aims to focus on creating a atmosphere that encourages and enables young women to exercise agency and autonomy in relation to their sexuality and education. This study also holds scope to benefit policy makers and stakeholders in RSE policy; schools, sexual health provisions, teachers. The findings from this research will offer a rich insight into the practices and impact of the delivery of policy within Catholic schools, as such offering participating institutions a point to reflect on and learn from. Within a broader context, this offers an opportunity to improve policy creation and implementation in future to serve the needs of young women educated in Catholic schools revealed within this study.

Methodologically, this project holds several notable benefits. First, the central feminist, phenomenological framework of the project holds considerable merit in centralising the voices and experiences of young women. Utilising a less structured, open approach to interviewing enables young women to explore ideas and thoughts around sexuality in a way they may be unable to at school or home. This in of itself can be viewed as an empowering and emboldening process. Secondly, the scope for virtual methods within this project (seen in Option B and C) may act as a notable advantage. Allowing participants, the option of taking part in the interviews from home may yield richer data as they would be in a comfortable, familiar environment. Furthermore, the removal of the school environment in Options B and C may further bolster a more naturalistic conversation, situating the researcher as more peer-like than teacher-like. Fundamentally, as the topic of this research

is markable sensitive, the comfort of the participants is of utmost importance to the project. As such, within all potential data collection options, the voice and needs of participants will be prioritised. Overall, the project aims to be collaborative and mutually beneficial, opening a space for young women to voice their experiences and needs in relation to pivotal education policy.

Risks of the research

Outline any potential risks (including risks to research staff, research participants, other individuals not involved in the research, the environment and/or society and the measures that will be taken to minimise any risks and the procedures to be adopted in the event of mishap.) ***Please ensure that you include any risks relating to overseas travel and working in overseas locations as part of the study, particularly if the work will involve travel to/working in areas considered unsafe and/or subject to travel warnings from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (see*** https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice)***. Please also be aware that the University insurer, UMAL, offers access to RiskMonitor Traveller, a service which provides 24/7/365 security advice for all travellers and you are advised to make use of this service (see https://umal.co.uk/travel/pre-travel-advice/).***

The outlining of the risks in this section does not circumvent the need to carry out and document a detailed Health and Safety risk assessment where appropriate – see below.

The nature of sexuality-based research within schools is markedly sensitive and as such evokes some notable risks to both the participants and researcher. The health and safety risks of this research are low, however the researcher has considered any risks associated with the project in line with the RAMP guidance issued within the College of Social Sciences. The principal nature of risk in this project surrounds the emotional well-being of researcher and participants. In any research involving young people and children, the power imbalance between adult researchers and participants creates a notable risk of participants being influenced or taken advantage of for research gain. In order to mitigate this risk, rigorous informed consent procedures and safeguarding measures must be taken to ensure that the research process is safe for all involved. As the participants will be minors, informed consent must be sought from their parents as well as the young women themselves. However, as this project centralises the autonomy and agency of young women, parental consent will be opt-out. This strategy places the onus of deciding to participate on the young women themselves, rather than prioritising parental views. To ensure full informed consent about the research process and the nature of the research subject, the participants will be presented with an age appropriate information pack that details the aims, methods, data handling, withdrawal and safeguarding measures and topics of the study prior to giving consent. The consent forms will include a checklist to gauge informed consent and understanding and the researcher will confirm this verbally at the start of the interviews. Similarly, all pupils in the class will receive an information pack and consent form prior to the classroom observation occurring.
The principal risks in discussing sexuality with young women surround the potentially triggering subject nature and the risk of a safeguarding disclosure occurring. Principally, these risks are higher within the second phase of research (interviews) as the classroom

observations will be more structured by the lesson plan. As the participants will be minors, ensuring a cohesive safeguarding procedure is in place is vital to the project. I will work with schools to implement their safeguarding policies during the research and to ensure appropriate signposting occurs if a disclosure were made. The safeguarding policy will be stated in consent sheets provided to both the parents and young women themselves. In order to mitigate emotional or psychological harm to participants, I will consistently check in to ensure the participant is comfortable discussing particular topics such as sexual relationships or experiences, giving the option to 'pause' the interview at any point if they feel uncomfortable. Furthermore, I will ensure that withdrawal procedures are explicitly explained in all documentation provided to participants and will verbally confirm these procedures at the start of the interview. Confidentiality and data protection are further pivotal factors in ensuring the safety of participants, as such the data management plan for the project will be clearly discussed with schools and participants and will be p The data will only be stored in a pseudonymised format and only the principal researcher will have access to password protected copies of any personal details. These details will only be retained for withdrawal purposes throughout the research.

The potential for the research to move into online methods presents some confidentiality risks. If interviews were conducted via a video conferencing platform and the young women engaged from home, there is no guarantee that the conversation would not be interrupted or overheard by a parent or sibling. Mitigating this risk is challenging as young women may lack privacy and/or their own space in a home environment. During the recruitment stage, the important of privacy and a comfortable space in which to engage with the interview will be emphasised, but fundamentally this would to some extent be at the jurisdiction of the young women. If options A or C are chosen, it may be easier to control the space within which the interview takes place as the school can provide a private room or space.

This research presents some risk to the researcher, principally within the one-to-one interview aspect of the study. As the interviews will follow a semi-structured framework, the researcher will not have totally control of what topics arise. As such, participants could raise topics or make a disclosure that I, as the researcher, may find emotionally distressing or that may cause some degree of stress. This risk is mitigated by ensuring support networks are in place prior to undertaking the research. I intend to feedback on the interviews to my supervisory team as they take place and will discuss any prevalent issues with them at that point. Furthermore, I already have an excellent emotional support framework available through private counselling. Therefore if any areas of the research hold a significant impact on my mental health, I feel very well prepared in accessing support.

There is some risk that parents or other individuals may find research into statutory sex education within a faith context inflammatory. Throughout 2019, the teaching of LGBT content within Relationships and Sex Education became a cultural and political sticking point, with many primary schools in Birmingham witnessing heated demonstrations. The climate surrounding RSE has seemingly moved on, therefore the risk of the research causing community tensions is small. However, I recognise the sensitivity of the topic within the local areas and will consult with schools around community response during the recruitment and planning stage.

University Health & Safety (H&S) risk assessment

For projects of more than minimal H&S risk it is essential that a H&S risk assessment is carried out and signed off in accordance with the process in place within your School/College and you must provide a copy of this with your application. The risk may be non-trivial because of travel to, or working in, a potentially unsafe location, or because of the nature of research that will carried out there. It could also involve (irrespective of location) H&S risks to research participants, or other individuals not involved directly in the research. Further information about the risk assessment process for research can be found at https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/hr/wellbeing/worksafe/policy/Research-Risk-Assessment-and-Mitigation-Plans-RAMPs.aspx.

Please note that travel to (or through) 'FCO Red zones' requires approval by the University's Research Travel Approval Panel, and will only be approved in exceptional circumstances where sufficient mitigation of risk can be demonstrated.

Section 11: Any other issues

Does the research raise any ethical issues not dealt with elsewhere in this form?

If yes, please provide further information:

N/A

Do you wish to provide any other information about this research not already provided, or to seek the opinion of the Ethics Committee on any particular issue?

If yes, please provide further information:

N/A

Section 12: Peer review

Has your project received scientific peer review?

Yes ☐
No ☒

If yes, please provide further details about the source of the review (e.g. independent peer review as part of the funding process or peer review from supervisors for PGR student projects):

Section 13: Nominate an expert reviewer

For certain types of project, including those of an interventional nature or those involving significant risks, it may be helpful (and you may be asked) to nominate an expert reviewer for your project. If you anticipate that this may apply to your work and you would like to nominate an expert reviewer at this stage, please provide details below.

Title: Click or tap here to enter text.
First name: Click or tap here to enter text.
Last name: Click or tap here to enter text.
Email address: Click or tap here to enter text.
Phone number: Click or tap here to enter text.

Brief explanation of reasons for nominating and/or nominee's suitability:

Section 14: Document checklist

Please check that the following documents, where applicable, are attached to your application:

Recruitment advertisement ☒
Participant information sheet ☒
Consent form ☒
Questionnaire ☐
Interview/focus group topic guide ☒

Please proof-read study documentation and ensure that it is appropriate for the intended audience before submission.

Section 15: Applicant declaration

Please read the statements below and tick the boxes to indicate your agreement:

I submit this application on the basis that the information it contains is confidential and will be used by the University of Birmingham for the purposes of ethical review and monitoring of the research project described herein, and to satisfy reporting requirements to regulatory bodies. The information will not be used for any other purpose without my prior consent. ☒

The information in this form together with any accompanying information is complete and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief and I take full responsibility for it. ☒

I undertake to abide by University Code of Practice for Research (https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/university/legal/research.pdf) alongside any other relevant professional bodies' codes of conduct and/or ethical guidelines. ☒

I will report any changes affecting the ethical aspects of the project to the University of Birmingham Research Ethics Officer. ☒

I will report any adverse or unforeseen events which occur to the relevant Ethics Committee via the University of Birmingham Research Ethics Officer. ☒

Please now save your completed form and email a copy to the Research Ethics Officer, at aer-ethics@contacts.bham.ac.uk. As noted above, please do not submit a paper copy.

Application for Ethical Review ERN_20-0389 – Amendments and Response to Committee

Due to time-constraints and hinderances caused by delays with ethical approval, a more direct and cohesive approach to relationship building and data collection is needed. Furthermore, with continuing pressures on schools to deliver 'catch up' education post-lockdown, along with the demand to provide statutory RSE from this term, I feel that a more collaborative approach is required in order to work with schools in a way that does not leave them feeling vulnerable to scrutiny. The preservation of rich data that centres the lives and voices of young women remains integral to this project, therefore the design reflects a methodology that is both deeply interpersonal and experience based and leverages interest and cooperation from the stakeholders necessary to access such data.

Fundamentally, this design places the focus on how RSE policy can ***best support*** young women in Catholic schools. Crucially, this shifts focus to policy rather than making individual schools seem exposed or necessarily at fault. This represents a structural issue in the understanding of young women within public policy, and in the relationship between the state and faith schools - rather than 'bad practice' or negligence on the part of schools and/or teachers.

As such, the new design offers a more rigorous structure, with the aim of solidifying access to enable data collection for phase 2 and 3 of the project to commence in September 2021. I have listed the relevant amendments for the committee to assess below.

Amendments:

With the considerable impact of school closures and national lockdown measures, preliminary recruitment for this study has been extremely challenging. As such, it is felt that increased relationship building with schools is required. I would therefore like to conduct some unstructured online meetings with senior leadership in prospective participating schools. This would ascertain their concerns regarding the new RSE policy and to assess what the schools feel they could gain/develop out of the project. The aim is to make the research somewhat collaborative with the schools to ensure that they do not feel the project aims to scrutinise or ‘name and shame’ school delivery, but rather aims to address broader structural and policy issues in the realm of Catholic RSE. These conversations will not produce data per se but will allow for relationship building prior to data collection in order to gain access. These conversations will not be recorded but field notes will be made if the staff member consents. This will allow me to address school concerns about the research and explain the methodology in full. Additionally, it will allow further insight into the school’s safeguarding and parental consent procedures so that these can be adopted within the data collection.

Based on preliminary conversations with those in the field of Relationships and Sex Education delivery, it is felt that classroom observations may increase staff anxiety around delivering new statutory content and increase the chances of schools feeling under scrutiny. As this is not the aim of the project, this stage of data collection will be replaced with one-to-one semi-structured interviews with staff about their delivery of RSE, feelings about the new policy and approach to teaching RSE content to young women (n= 1 per school). The appropriate topic guide is attached to this document.

The one-to-one interviews with young women will be replaced by focus groups (n= 2 per school) with young women. This change is to enable a more participatory approach to youth research with the aim of co-producing an understanding of what young women want from RSE in Catholic schools and enables more creative approaches such as the use written brainstorms and post-it note exercises. Largely, the format and topics of will remain the same as the former proposed interviews – however, adopting feedback from the committee, more personal questions will be replaced with vignettes or broader social examples. e.g. 'What are your expectations of sex in relationships' will be replaced by 'what do you feel are the expectations of people your age of sex in relationships?'. The topic guide, updated accordingly, is attached.

As the timeframe for the study has now been extended, conducting face-to-face data collection seems like a viable option. In the original application, 3 methodologies were proposed due to the lack of clarity around lockdown measures at the time. Following the recommendations of the committee, option B, the option for young women to participate virtually from their homes, has been removed. Additionally, based on preliminary conversations with teachers, Option C (virtual interviews conducted on school property) is now viewed as unsuitable. This is as this presents several safeguarding issues for the school and would require a member of staff to be present during the interviews (also see Amendment 4 – Option C would be more complicated for participatory methods). The new proposed timeframe and conduct of the research are displayed below:

Preliminary Research Timeline

Research Stage	Aims	Conduct	Number
Phase 1: Preliminary Conversations with SLT (May-July 2021)	To build relationships with prospective participating schools and ascertain how project	Virtual format (Zoom, MS teams or telephone) – exact medium will be depend on SLT preference.	N=<10

	could seek to collaborate with and benefit schools.	Unstructured. Fieldnotes taken during conversation. Consent will be gathered via email prior to conversation.	
Review Period (July - September 2021)	To reflect on conversations with SLT and prepare to undertake data collection in the autumn.	n/a	n/a
Phase 2: One-to-one Interviews with RSE-delivering staff (September-November 2021)	To gauge staff views on how delivery of statutory RSE is going, views on teaching young women and where they feel there is any gaps in policy.	Face-to-face. Semi-structured. Confidential. Will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. Consent gathered in written form via email prior and verbally during interview. Same data protection systems apply as for students.	N= <5 1 per school
Phase 3: In-depth, semi-structured focus group	To centre young women's voices and experiences	Face-to-face Semi-structured.	N=<5 young women

(September - November- 2021)	of RSE and the impact of policy on their lives. To incorporate participatory methods to evaluate Catholic RSE from young women's perspectives	Use of creative brainstorming methods. Confidential Audio-recorded and transcribed. Same consent procedures as original application.	1 per school

Response to Committee:

If opt-out parental consent is to be used, how will you ensure that all parents receive the information? For example, is it possible for the school to e-mail all parents, put notices in newsletters etc.? Can you be certain that all parents receive the study information? If you cannot guarantee that parents will receive the information, please provide further comment on how the girl's right to make autonomous decisions will be balanced against the parents right to withdraw their child.

If school interest is ascertained in Phase 1, the most effective procedure to obtain parental consent will be negotiated with school leadership. As the study aims to focus on one class per school, school-wide newsletters and contact to all parents would not be suitable. I will liaise with school SLT and the class teacher to establish the most appropriate way to contact parents, yet initially I intend to provide the pupils with the full information sheets and parental consent forms to take home – this will be accompanied by a letter or email sent directly to parents to ensure they are aware of the research and need to fill out the consent form for withdrawal. Notably, the pupil consent forms include a section that necessitates them having given their parents the information in order to participate.

Please comment on the risks as follows:
Please clarify what would happen if a participant disclosed sexual abuse/crimes. Would confidentiality be breached and, the schools safeguarding procedures be followed? Please ensure this is clear in all participant facing documents.
Please clarify how it would be handled if during the interviews participants became upset about a subject or, requested further information/help on a topic? Can a list of further support organisations be put together which can be shared with the participants at the start of the project (i.e. at the same

time as the information sheet, or include details within the information sheet itself)? It is recommended that these organisations are independent of the Catholic church but, also acceptable for the schools and parents in question.

Following the British Education Research Association (BERA) ethical guidance this study will follow the internal safeguarding procedures of the participating schools, as usually this is a requirement of school-based research (BERA, 2018). I will discuss this in the preliminary conversations with SLT to ensure I am prepared with the relevant contacts and resources in the case of a disclosure. If a participant does present with indications of abuse or harm, I will follow school processes and report the issue to the school safeguarding lead. I have adjusted the participant facing documents to reiterate that whilst confidentiality is of utmost importance, this will be broken only where necessary if someone is at risk from harm. This will be reiterated at the start of the focus groups. This approach is also informed by the NSPCC guidance on dealing with safeguarding concerns in research with children and young people (available at https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/briefings/research-with-children-ethics-safety-avoiding-harm#article-top)

It will be reiterated that participants can pause or withdraw from the focus group at any time if they find any of the topics or questions uncomfortable, upsetting or distressing. Fundamentally, this work is participant centred and semi-structured, therefore the researcher will not press any line of questioning if it appears to make any participant distressed. Furthermore, it is vital to recognise that any research into sexuality and relationships can be challenging and at times emotionally difficult to discuss. As such, at the start of the focus groups I will emphasise how participants are not obligated to provide information or details of anything unless they feel comfortable to do so. The information sheet has been updated to include supportive resources and organisations, separate from the Church, that participants can turn to if the focus groups evokes anything traumatic or uncomfortable for them and this will be explained in detail at the start of all focus groups.

While the majority of the interview questions are good, it was highlighted that the last set of questions (concerning personal relationships), do not always focus on RSE e.g. 'are you dating anyone currently?' and 'what are your expectations of sex in relationships?' It was highlighted that these direct personal and intimate questions do not appear to be necessary for the required research purposes.

As the study has moved into focus groups with the young women – vignettes or 'distanced' questions will be used to discuss topics such as relationships without broaching into uncomfortable personal details or topics for the participants.

i.e., 'What do you think are the expectations of relationships for people your age?'

or 'If two people at your school were dating, what do you think that relationship would look like?'

This is illustrated in the updated topic guide.

It was requested that out of the methodologies presented that, option B (interviewing the participants from their own homes) be removed. This is due to the risks to the participants.

This has been removed accordingly and replaced by the Phase 3 focus groups with young women which will happen on school property.

Please amend the participant information sheets as follows:
Please state that you will not be directly sharing information provided in the interviews with teachers/parents in a named format.
This has been noted in the updated pupil information sheet.
Please state when confidentiality would need to be breached (i.e. if they indicated risk to themselves/others, as mentioned in the above query).
This has been noted in the pupil information sheet.
In the information sheet for schools, please explain that the researcher may want the use of a private room for interviews.
This will be stated and agreed in preliminary correspondence with schools
The last paragraph states '*Participants will be contacted in the event of any future publication of the data following the completion of the thesis to allow withdrawal*'. However, it was assumed that by the time the thesis is completed the data will be anonymised and there will be no possibility of withdrawing data?
This statement has been replaced. Participants will be able to withdraw at any time prior to January 2022, after which all data will be fully analysed and anonymised. Participants will not be notified of further publications but it is stated in the document that all future publications from the study will be fully anonymised and no traceable data of the participants and schools will be included.
Please check all participant facing documents for typographical errors.
This has been noted.

Please comment on the gender mix of the School and teaching groups being observed (will they only be single sex schools/classes?).
The study will be conducted over a mix of schools, therefore there is potential that some of the participating schools will be single gender. However, broadly the schools will be mixed gender.

As the classroom observation element has been removed from the study, the focus will be on young women and Teachers within the schools rather than whole classes.

Please confirm what would happen to the girls who do not consent to the observation? Will they be removed from the class? If yes, could this be detrimental to their learning?

As the element of observation has been removed from the study, participation in the focus groups is entirely voluntary and will happen outside of valuable lesson time. It is recognised that withdrawal from RSE lessons would potentially hinder learning and engagement pupils.

Appendix B – School Recruitment Letter

Dear ---------

I hope this letter finds you well.

I am writing to express interest in developing a piece of research with your school. I am currently completing my doctorate in social policy at the University of Birmingham. My research seeks to explore the experiences and perceptions of young women receiving Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in Catholic secondary schools, alongside the voices of those who develop and teach this subject. My aim is to create a holistic and rich image of RSE delivery in Catholic schooling, and to ask whether the Department for Education and other surrounding organisations can better support faith schools in continuing to deliver high quality sex education.

There has been heightened attention on sex education in England since the introduction of statutory RSE, and I feel this is an excellent opportunity to centre young women's voices and evoke a positive narrative for the future.
Ultimately, this project seeks to reframe conversations about faith schools and RSE by centring the voices of those actively involved in the process, rather than evaluate or assess performance or approach.
I recently met with Dr Sean Whittle, who spoke very highly of your school and your RSE delivery. As such, I was wondering if it would be at all possible for me to spend some time in your school in the autumn term to observe and explore your approach to the subject?

The study itself would comprise of some unstructured conversations with staff delivering or developing RSE within your school, followed by one or two focus groups with young women to gain understanding of the pupil perspective. Both of these conversations would happen on school property and accord with your safeguarding procedures.

I am in receipt of a current, full DBS check and have previously conducted research with Catholic schools in the West Midlands. The timings and logistics of data collection are flexible and can be designed to best suit the needs of your school and pupils.

Please contact me via the information shown above if you have any queries or concerns, or would like to discuss the project further.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter.

Best Wishes,
Abby Gilsenan

Appendix C – School Recruitment Flyer

Midlands Graduate School Doctoral Training Partnership

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

CALL FOR PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS



STUDY EXPLORING YOUNG WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF STATUTORY RSE IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

- I am currently recruiting Catholic secondary schools to participate in my ESRC funded doctoral research study due to take place in 2021.
- The study aims to explore how statutory Relationships and Sex Education delivered within Catholic schools intersects with young women's experiences and understandings of sexuality.
- This research provides a timely analysis of the implemenation of statutory Relationships and Sex Education policy as it is rolled out in English faith schools.
- I am interested in exploring how this new guidance intersects with current practice in Catholic schools and, specifically, how young women are responding to this new intersection of policy
- This is a two-phase study: phase one would involve a virtual classroom observation of an RSE lesson and phase two would involve one-to-one interviews with a small group of young women. COVID precautions will be undetaken and virtual methods of data collection can be negotiated to best meet the needs of your school.

PLEASE CONTACT ME FOR FURTHER DETAILS OR TO REGISTER INTEREST

AAG595@student.bham.ac.uk

RELATIONSHIPS AND SEX EDUCATION

Appendix D – Staff Participant Documents

Research Information Sheet (Staff)

Exploring young women's lived experiences of statutory RSE in Catholic Schools.

Description of Study

This research aims to understand young women's perceptions and experiences of the new statutory RSE policy within Catholic schools. Alongside this aim, I am also interested in gauging staff experiences of preparing and delivering RSE content in Catholic schools, after the introduction of statutory RSE. Ultimately, my aim is to work with schools to ascertain their views on RSE policy and implementation, and to assess whether the DfE and other organisations could be doing more to support Catholic schools in continuing to deliver high quality RSE.

The study itself involves two stages, first I want to interview staff members involved in planning and delivering RSE content within your school and second, I will hold focus group with some young women to reflect on their perspectives and understandings of the subject.

What would participation entail?

Participation for staff would involve a short, informal interview (around 30 minutes long) about experiences, thoughts and feelings relating to the design and delivery of RSE. This conversation is not intended to assess or scrutinise RSE practice within your school, but rather to develop a deeper understanding of what it is like to deliver RSE in a Catholic school and whether governmental policy could be adapted to meet the needs of pupils and staff in faith schools. The interview will be audio-recorded with your consent, and later transcribed. Any personal or identifiable details of both staff and the school will be removed in the write up of this study, and any associated publications.

Data security and Safeguarding

As the topic of this research is sensitive, the data collection within this study will be designed and undertaken with the utmost regard for research integrity and ethical practice. Both research design and practice will be conducted with consideration of the British Education Research Association (2018) and British Sociological Association (2017) guidelines for ethical research and data management. All data collated within the study will be treated as confidential and will only be stored in a pseudonymised form. No raw data will be stored and only the researcher will have access to personal details of participants for the purpose of participant withdrawal. De-identified, transcribed data will be stored using the University of Birmingham's secure BEAR data store and following the completion of research will be deposited into the university's E-Data repository for reference if any future publication were to occur from this work.

Full informed consent to the collection and potential storage of data will be obtained from all parties, including school SLT, teaching staff, parents and pupils, prior to the collection of

any data.. Participants and/or schools can withdraw from the project and have all data erased at any point in the study, prior to January 2022 (after this point data will be analysed and will be harder to withdraw details from).

Funding

This project is funded by the ESRC Midlands Doctoral Training Partnership.

Research Team

Please feel free to contact myself or Dr Sarah Hall with any queries or concerns.

Primary Researcher:
Abby Gilsenan.
School of Social Policy
University of Birmingham
[redacted]

Supervisor
Dr Sarah Hall
School of Education
University of Birmingham
[redacted]

Staff Consent Form

Exploring young women's lived experiences of statutory RSE in Catholic Schools.

Contact details

Name: _____

School Name: _____

Email address: _____

Consent to participate in the research

		Please initial box
1	I have been told what this research is about and what it involves. I have been given an information sheet and have had opportunity to ask questions.	
2	I understand that I do not have to take part in the research. I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason (prior to January 2022).	
3	I understand that I will not be named in any research outputs, and my personal information will remain confidential.	
4	I agree to be audio-recorded. I understand that I can still take part without being recorded if I wish.	
5	I understand that my words, but not my name or that of my organisation, may be used in research reports.	
6	I consent to the information I provide within this research being used confidentially and anonymously within the initial publication and any connected publications that may stem from this research.	
7	I agree to take part in this research	

Participant signed: …… **Date:** ……

Researcher signed: …… **Date:** ……

Appendix E – Pupil Participant Documents

Pupil Information Sheet

Exploring Young Women's Experiences of Relationships and Sex Education in Catholic Schools

Invitation

You are invited to take part in a research study which aims to find out if and how Relationships and Sex Education in Catholic secondary schools impacts the lives of young women. Before you decide whether you would like to take part, it is important you understand what would be involved. Please take you time to read through this sheet and to discuss it with your family/friends/teachers if you wish. If there is anything you do not understand or if you would just like to know more about the study, please feel free to email me at the address listed on the next page.

What is the purpose of this study?

Sex education is increasingly recognised as an important factor in supporting young people as they navigate puberty, relationships and sexuality. For young women in particular, sex education is seen as a way to encourage empowerment, healthy choices and positive outcomes later in life. In September 2020, the government introduced compulsory Relationships and Sex Education for all secondary schools in England. This means that religious secondary schools, including Catholic schools, now have to provide sex education to all pupils by law. There have been lots of positive responses to this policy introduction, however, I have found that young women have somewhat been left out of the conversation. The purpose of this study is to see what young women who go to Catholic secondary schools really think about Relationships and Sex Education. I am interested in finding out whether you think the sex education delivered in your school meets your expectations for Relationships and Sex Education, how it impacts your life and how the Catholic faith effects this subject. Overall, the goal of this project is to work with young women to include their experiences within the bigger conversation about Relationships and Sex education in faith schools.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen as your school has decided to participate in this study. Within the study, I am looking to speak to young women who attend Catholic secondary schools managed under the Birmingham Diocese and are in year 9 and above. All pupils in your school who fit this description are invited to participate in the study.

What will taking part involve?

This study has two parts. The first stage involves conversations with teachers in your school who teach Relationships and Sex Education about their experiences and thoughts on the new content.

The second part of the study involves a focus group with a group of young women at your schools where I will ask about your thoughts and experiences of Relationships and Sex Education. This wouldn't be a formal or scary interview, rather just a casual chat about how sex education affects your life and what you think should be included. There are no right or wrong ways to take part in this conversation. During the focus group, I will use some creative techniques, such as mind maps, to

help us un-pick our thoughts on sex education collectively. Ultimately, this is a collaborative conversation with you – so your thoughts and ideas will guide how this conversation goes.

As my study focuses on young women, only those who identify as girls are invited to take part in the focus group stage of the study.

What do I have to do if I want to take part?

If you would like to take part in the study, it is important that you read through this sheet and discuss it with your family before deciding. Ultimately it is your decision whether or not to be involved but if you parents would rather you didn't take part, they will have to sign the opt-out form that your teacher has given you. If you decide to take part, please give your consent form to your teacher who can then pass it on to me and then we can arrange a date and time to conduct the interview.

Sex Education is a sensitive topic, what can I do if I want support before or after taking part?

Talking about sexuality, bodies and relationships can understandably be quite challenging at times. It is important to remember taking part in this study is entirely optional and you can pause the conversation and your involvement at any time. If any of topics discussed within sex education or this study are uncomfortable or distressing, or even If you just want more information, there are several resources you can turn to for support:

https://www.bishuk.com/
Sex and Relationships Information for those over 14.

https://www.brook.org.uk/
Sexual Health and Relationships Support for Young People

https://www.relate.org.uk/relationship-help/help-young-adults
Healthy Relationships Support for 16-25 year olds.

https://rapecrisis.org.uk/
Support around abuse and sexual violence for women.

https://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/resources/frequently-asked-questions
Information about the new RSE policy and school requirements

What will I gain from taking part?

Taking part would allow you to be part of a really important part of research. By looking into how young women experience and relate to sex education, we can work towards improving sex education for future generations of girls. This is really important as sex education helps to keep us safe and making healthy choices with sex and relationships all throughout our lives. Ultimately, this research aims to help the people that make sex education policy and teachers who deliver the content to tailor it to the needs of girls in the 21st century and being part of that is a really big thing to celebrate!

What will happen to my data/answers?

As the topic of sex education can be quite personal, keeping your privacy and identity protected is really important within this study. For that reason, I will use a number system to identify your answers rather than your name or any personal information. Your details will only be accessible by me, in case you decided to stop taking part in the study. All of your answers will be confidential, I will only share details with a member staff at your school if it appears that someone in the group is significantly at risk from themselves or someone else (this will follow the safeguarding rules within your school and be dealt with by the Designated Safeguarding Lead).

None of your personal details or information will be published or written up into the results and all transcripts and recordings will be stored in encrypted (password protected) storage. No identifiable details of your school will be written up either so there would be no way for someone to link your answers back to you. Furthermore, no identifiable data will be shown to your school or teachers. The University of Birmingham have very strict rules about data storage so this will ensure you are protected.

If after the focus group, you decide you'd rather not have your answers quoted in the study or analysed, you are completely free to withdraw from the study. Just let me know via email and I will ensure your answers are removed from the written-up research. Please let me know if you want to withdraw your answers before January 2022 so I have enough time to edit the data before it is written up.

All future published research from this study will be fully anonymised.

Who is conducting this study?

My name is Abby Gilsenan and I am conducting this study as part of my PhD project. I am in my second year in the School of Social Policy. I have previously conducted research in schools and will be in receipt of a full DBS check.

Who is funding this study?

This study is funded by my Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) studentship, provided by the Midlands Graduate School.

Do I have to take part?

No. Taking part is entirely optional and you can choose to withdraw from the study at any time prior to January 2022.

Contacts for Further Information

If you or your parents have any questions or would like any further information, please don't hesitate to contact me at [redacted] or by telephone on [redacted].

This project is supervised by Sarah Hall (School of Education) who can be contacted via email at [redacted] and Dr Sophie King-Hill (Health Services Management Centre) who can be reached at [redacted]

Many thanks for reading this information.

Pupil Consent Form

Exploring Young Women's Experiences of Relationships and Sex Education in Catholic Schools

Phase Two: Pupil Focus Groups

I agree to take part in stage two of the Exploring Young Women's Experiences of RSE study.
Please tick as appropriate:

I have read the pupil information sheet and know what is involved in the project.
I understand what the focus group will be about
I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study (either to the researcher or my teacher)
I have discussed the study with my parents and given them the opportunity to sign the opt-out form.
I understand that I do not have to take part and can withdraw from the study if I wish to

Name ……

Signature ……..

School Name ……

Opt-Out Parental Consent Form

Exploring Young Women's Experiences of Relationships and Sex Education in Catholic Schools

To be completed by all parents

I confirm that I have read and understand the pupil information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I DO NOT wish my child to take part in the above study

Please use BLOCK CAPITALS

Your Name …….

Child's full name…….

Child's school ……
……. …….

Signature of Parent/Guardian Date signature. …….

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher (Abby Gilsenan) at [redacted] or via telephone on [redacted]

Appendix F – Interview and Focus Group Topic Guides

Staff Interview Topic Guide

Exploring Young Women's Experiences of Relationships and Sex Education in Catholic Schools

Preface: This study employs a relational, semi-structured and voice-centred methodology. As such, this topic guide provides a flexible framework which may not completely reflect the direction of the interview conversation. This merely provides a suggestion of topics that are likely to be included and highlights the central areas of discussion that would benefit the research questions and aims of the project.

Check list:

- Consent form completed
- Info pack read
- Voice recorder set up
- Withdrawal process and data protection explained to participant.

ONE TO ONE INTERVIEW WITH STAFF DELIVERING RSE
Length: around 30 minutes.

Introduction

Greet participant and outline consent procedures, withdrawal and ensure they have read and returned info sheet and consent forms (inc. parental consent forms).
Outline aims/purpose of project and data storage procedures
Complete check list.

Background and Teaching Experience

Prompts:
How long have you been teaching RSE?
What is your main subject?
How long have you been at this school?
How often do you teach RSE?

Strengths – school and national policy, own approach, positive experiences.

Prompts:
Do you enjoy teaching RSE at the moment?
What, in your view, are the strengths of RSE in your school?
What do you think of the new statutory policy?
Tell me about any positive experiences you've had whilst delivering RSE?
What's your favourite aspect of RSE lessons/delivery/policy?

Delivering RSE – thoughts, feelings, anxieties.

Prompts:
How do you feel about teaching RSE?
Tell me about your most recent RSE lesson – How do you feel it went?
Tell me about your thought process whilst delivering an RSE lesson?
Has COVID-19 changed the way RSE is delivered/received?

Training and Resources – CES, DfE, Internal, other (online etc.)

Prompts:

-Have you had any formal training on RSE delivery – if so, could you tell me about it? (i.e. what organisation ran it, when was it).

- Did you find that training useful?

-What resources do you turn to most often within RSE practice?

- Tell me about any resources you might have received from the DfE/CES?

- Where would you look for specific RSE resources if you needed to?

Support – CES, DfE, Internal.

Prompts:

Where would you go/who would you talk to if you were unsure about a topic you had to teach in RSE?

Do you feel supported in delivering RSE?

Tell me about your support networks for teaching RSE?

Gender in the classroom – experience teaching young women, interactions, behaviour etc.

Prompts:

What is like delivering RSE in a mixed gender/girl's school?

What would be your priorities when delivering RSE to young women?

How do you find teaching young women RSE? Are there any specific challenges?

In your view, how do young women engage in RSE? What is behaviour like?

Are there any specific concerns regarding young women and RSE?

In your view, what are the biggest hurdles young women face regarding relationships and sexuality? How do you think we should address these issues in RSE?

Faith and RSE – experience of delivering Catholic RSE.

Prompts:

Tell me about teaching RSE in a Catholic school.

Tell me about the role of faith in RSE delivery in your school.

Tell me about the relationship between Catholicism and RSE in your school.

Recommendations and hopes for the future.

Prompts:

Is there anything you would add to the DfE guidance if possible?

Is there anything you would change about the way RSE is taught in general?

Do you think RSE will change over the coming years?

Who is responsible for improving RSE in England?

How do you feel about the future of RSE

Close

Allow space for further comments and questions, explain next stages of research project and confirm what will happen with their answers. Ensure participant is okay and signpost if anything has brought up an emotional response, provide contact details if questions/feelings arise after the interview has finished. Thank participant for time.

Pupil Semi-Structured Topic Guide

Exploring Young Women's Experiences of Relationships and Sex Education in Catholic Schools

Preface: This study employs a relational, semi-structured and voice-centred methodology. As such, this topic guide provides a flexible framework which may not completely reflect the direction of the interview conversation. This merely provides a suggestion of topics that are likely to be included and highlights the central areas of discussion that would benefit the research questions and aims of the project. Questions will differ depending on how the participants feel and how comfortable they are within the topic area. Ultimately, the participants will lead the conversation, with the researcher facilitating discussion by using relevant prompts and questions.

Check list:

- Consent form completed
- Parental consent form returned
- Info pack read
- Voice recorder set up
- Withdrawal process and data protection explained to participant.
- Ground rules established
- Get everyone's names

ONE TO ONE INTERVIEW
Length – around 1 hour

Introduction

Greet participant and outline consent procedures, withdrawal and ensure they have read and returned info sheet and consent forms (inc. parental consent forms).
Outline aims/purpose of project and data storage procedures
Complete check list.

Go through ground rules:

There are no right or wrong answers! I just want to hear your thoughts, opinions and experiences! We want this to be an open discussion and hopefully be fun as well!
This is a confidential space – we might discuss things that are personal or sensitive so need to agree that that won't be shared outside of this room without our permission.
We don't have to answer any questions we don't want to.
Respect each other and listen.
We can pause or stop at anytime you like.
You can ask me questions as well!

START:

ASK EVERYONE TO SAY NAMES FOR RECORDING AND TRANSCRIPTION.

Section One: School Life and RSE

Introducing RSE – lesson discussion

Discuss RSE lessons and current delivery:

Example Questions:
Tell me about your experience of RSE this year?
How have you found those lessons?
How does it feel to be in those lessons?
have you had RSE throughout your time at this school? How many times a year do you have those lessons?
Do you find those lessons useful? Would you say you've learnt anything new from them?
What content have you enjoyed/what content did you find challenging?
Do you think RSE has been different this year to other years?

RSE in broader school context

Discuss structure of RSE delivery in school

Example questions:
- **Tell me about how the Catholic side of your school comes into RSE? Does it play a role? How?**
-From your perspective, what do you think the priorities of your school are when it comes to RSE?
- How does it feel to discuss sex and relationships with a teacher?

Section Two: Purpose and Discourse in RSE

Discuss aims, priorities and issues faced by young people and how RSE ought to tackle them.

Example Questions:

If you could design an RSE lesson, what topics would you like to include?
What do you think are the biggest challenges people your age face when it comes to learning about/experiencing relationships and sexuality?
How is that handled in your RSE lessons?
Is there anything you think school should be talking about/doing that they are not currently?
Do you think religion plays a part in the aims of your RSE lessons at all?

Section Three: Youth Culture, Family and Other Sources of RSE

Discuss sources of sexual knowledge, support systems and cultures of discussing sensitive issues outside of RSE lessons.

Example Questions:

How do you learn about or find out about sex and relationships?
Would you feel comfortable talking about those things with your (mum/parents/family member if mentioned)?
Do you and your friends talk about this stuff a lot then? Or Would you feel comfortable asking your friends about that?
Where online do you think you'd look for information about sex and relationships?
If you wanted to find something out about contraception, what would you do?
Overall, where do you think you've learnt about sex and relationships? What was the most influential for you?
Has how you learn about sex and relationships changed over time at all?

Section Four: Personal Relationships

If participants are comfortable to do so, begin to discuss how RSE affects their own experiences of relationships/dating or how they view other peoples relationships/dating.

Example Questions:

Do you think RSE is realistic about the kinds of relationships people have at your age?
Is dating part of your school culture? What does that look like?
Do you think anything you've learnt about relationships/sexuality/sexual health (from RSE or other sources) has influenced your relationship/your attitude to relationships at all?
Are there any expectations around sex/sexuality in relationships? /what are the expectations of sex in relationships for people your age?
Do you discuss these topics with your partner/would you want to discuss these things with a future partner?
What do you think the biggest hurdles are in relationships at your age?

Section Five: Close

Allow space for further comments and questions, explain next stages of research project and confirm what will happen with their answers. Ensure participant is okay and signpost if anything has brought up an emotional response, provide contact details if questions/feelings arise after the interview has finished.
Thank participants for time

Appendix G - Example of Stage One Analysis (School A)

Key: Red text: Descriptive comments; Blue text: Linguistic comments; Green text: Conceptual comments.

Speaker key: multiple/Ruby/Ada/Krista/Nisha/Chloe/teacher

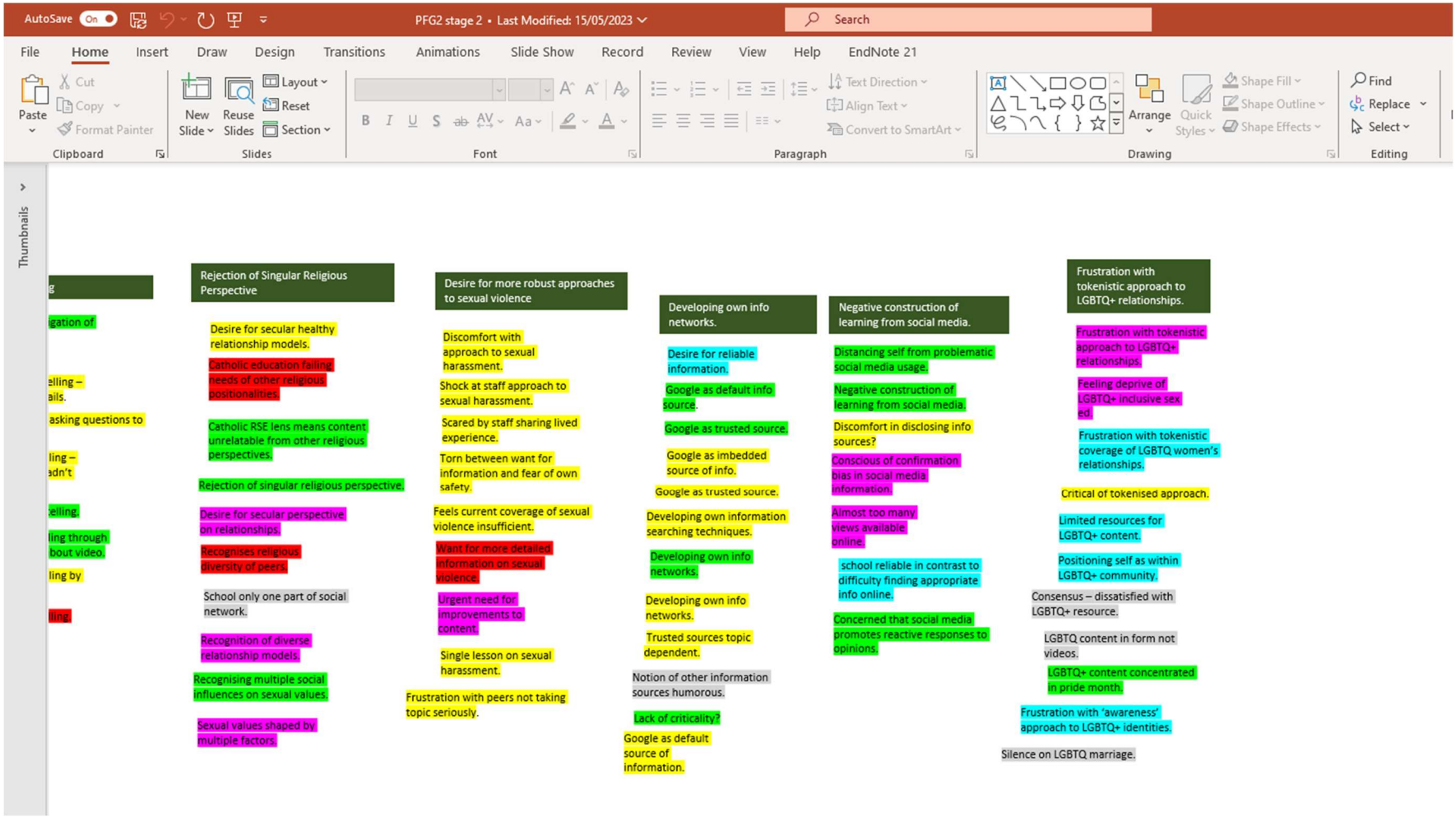
Emerging Themes	Line no.	Transcript	Exploratory Comments
	287	ADA	Why is this deemed appropriate for primary age children but other content around bodies/relationships isn't?
Periods as gender segregated topic in primary.	288	In year 5 the girls talked about periods. And then	
	289	they did, they showed us some weird video from	
Rejection of extremely outdated personal hygiene content.	290	the 80s about like, wearing deodorant.	ADA highlights differences in primary school content.
	291		
	292	Abby Gilsenan	Girls arrived at school with varying knowledge bases/experiences of RSe.
	293	Okay [laughs] that sounds unusual.	
	294		Gender divided menstrual education at primary.
	295	RUBY	
Shared experience of outdated personal hyenine content.	296	Oh yeah we got that.	Memory of outdate content on personal hygiene.
	297		
	298	KRISTA	What are the boundaries of 'age appropriate' content for primary schools?
Menstrual education sole focus of primary content.	299	We got periods and that was it, so like, nothing we	
Menstrual education as nothing new.	300	hadn't done.	Rejection of outdated content.
	301		
	302	NISHA	
Mixed gender menstrual education in primary.	303	We did that in year five and year six with the boys.	Menstrual education as nothing new.
Remembers boy's still removed from classroom some topics.	304	Then there was like some times when the boys	
	305	would leave the room, but most of the time was	
	306	altogether.	Mixed gender menstrual education in last years of primary, yet boy's still separated at some times.
	307		
Remembers primary RSE as always mixed gender.	308	RUBY	
	309	The boys never left the room for us.	What informs decision making on these gendered topics?
	310		
	311	Abby Gilsenan	
	312		

Appendix H – Example of Stage One Analysis (Teacher Two)

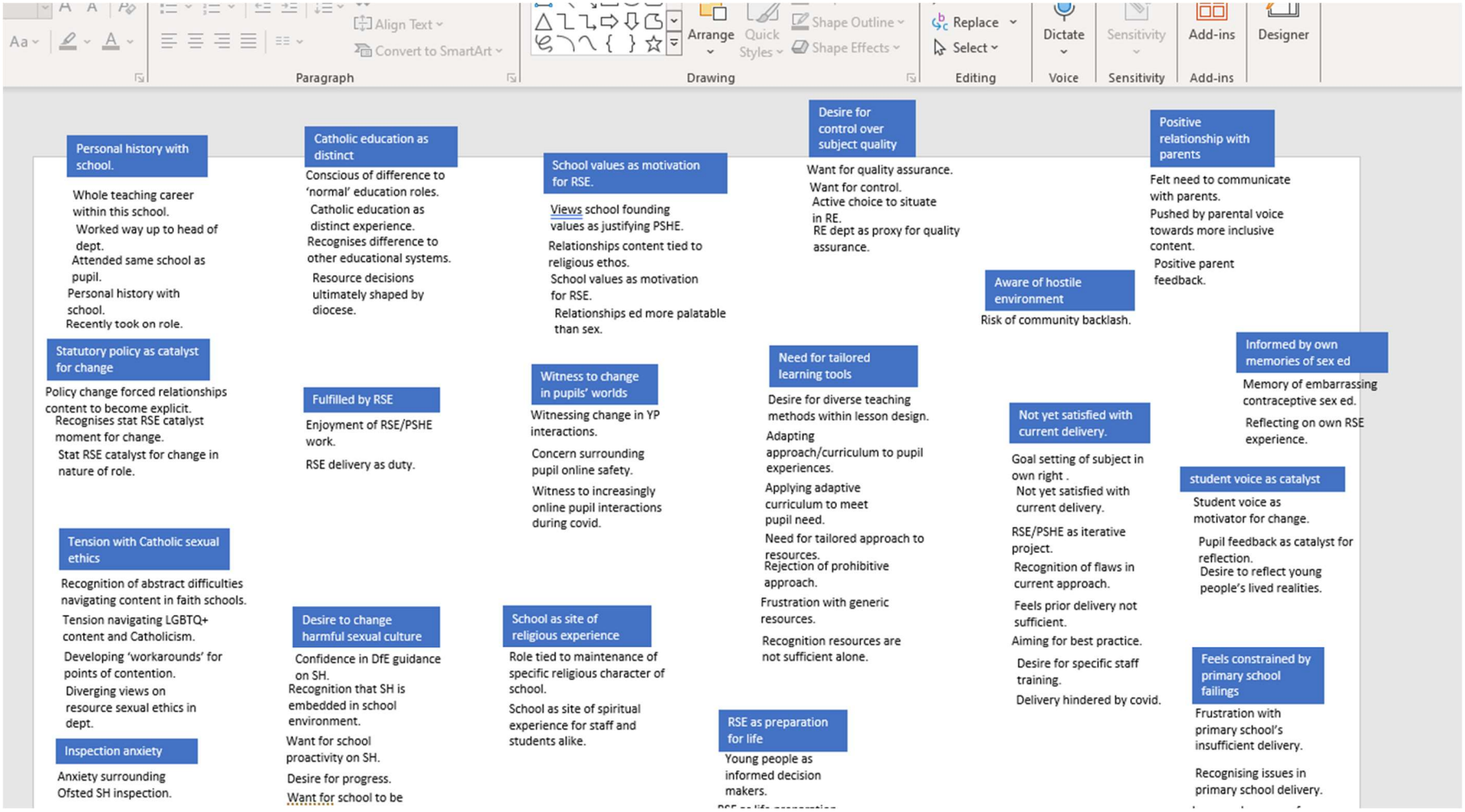
. Key: Red text: Descriptive comments; Blue text: Linguistic comments; Green text: Conceptual comments.

Positive view of inclusion of gospel values. Frustrated with singular presentation of catholic values in resources. Questioning own belonging in faith. Personal tension with presentation of conservative catholic values. Feeling ostracised from resource narrative due to divorce. Want to present non-dogmatic approach to Catholic teachings. Distancing self from resource decision. Diocese want for consistency across schools.	59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88	made. But my biggest criticism from them, It is very one dimensional. And I think like, some of the students were saying, it's not very, you know, if you could look at them and think, 'Well, I'm Catholic, and I disagree with that., and then does that make me a bad Catholic? you start like questioning your Religion. So, like, you know, your your beliefs. And there are some things on that I, I don't prescribe. Where, like I say, I'm divorced. When it's there, about the marriage, erm, about what Catholics, what the Catholic teaching is. So I think when, I try and get get through to students that, you know, yes, the Catholic Church teaches this, however, yeah, we are all free, we've been given free will to make our minds up and putting that into practice, you know, it's not always going to be be the same. Abby Gilsenan Yeah, definitely. Yeah. So, were you involved in the decision? Like, did you look at other resources, alongside TenTen? I know there's, is it Sacred Heart is another one or yeah, there's a couple of others but yeah. T2 I'm not sure what [Dept. Head Name] would've looked at, you know, like a lot of schools within the diocese, um, have gone for TenTen resources, [other school name] just up the road have as well. It's kind of a thing like the diocese wanted us to be consistent.	Frustrated with lack of nuance in resources. Positioning response in relation to pupil focus group discussion. 'you know' what is implied here? Some level of unspoken mutual understanding about resources. Questioning own faith identity as result of messages of video resources. Tension between versions of Catholicism. Perception of self tied to adherence to religious values? Moral character implications of video content. What kind of person does the TenTen teaching implore us to be? Tension between personal enactment of relationships and sexual values prescribed in teaching resources. Personal rejection of some Catholic sexual values. How do modern Catholics navigate which church teachings they agree with and enact? Sense the resource messaging brings into question her own experiences and life choices. Enactment of church teachings as something negotiated by the individual – reflects this to pupils also.

Appendix I – Example of Stage Two Analysis (School B)



Appendix J – Example of Stage Two Analysis (Teacher Three)



Appendix K – Stage Three Analysis (School A)

Pupil Focus Group 1: Stage 3
Mapping Superordinate and Emergent Themes
Participant Voice Key: MIA LILY ELLA NADIA SAFFI SASHA TeacherAll

Superordinate Theme	Emergent Themes	Transcript Quotations	Line Number
RSE as valuable	Some topics are still novel. Experienced different lesson on ending platonic and romantic relationships. Recognises importance of RSE despite repetitive structure. Learning new things through RSE lessons. Other participants shared the lesson on gender equality. Less relevant at primary age? Recent experience of RSE Had RSE last year of primary.	*MIA* *but there's some things you just like, didn't know before.* *LILY* *It's important to talk about the things talked about though.* *ELLA* *You wouldn't really care about stuff that you would now.*	**L114,P.4** **L118,P.5** **L1591, P.55**
Discomfort as barrier to learning	Discomfort in repeating sexualised language. Discomfort discussing sexual insults with adults. Topics incongruous within school environment. Discomfort with language of sexual insults. RSE topics can be challenging to discuss. Felt uncomfortable and awkward in lesson. Uncomfortable discussing SH with male peers. Not consistently comfortable asking Teachers for advice on sex and relationships. Lack of communication.	*Multiple Speakers* *Yeah you will [laughter}* *SAFFI* *you've got to talk about like, stuff that you don't usually talk about.* *SAFFI* *just like the normal stuff. Like.* *SAFFI* *because it's not easy* *SAFFI* *It's almost kind of awkward.* *LILY* *I would say it'd be awkward, talking about it. You know, with this tension like.*	**L440,P.16** **L61,P.3** **L425,P.15** **L59,P.3** **L52,P.2** **L967,P.34**

Disengagement in lessons	No strong emotions felt in lesson. Lessons seen as commonplace, evoked no significant feelings. Disengaged in topics that overlap such as marriage/forced marriage. Lessons repetitive and covering pre-established knowledge. Rejection of cringey/comical teaching methods used in primary. Distinct creative teaching methods at primary stage compared to secondary. Some topics repeated more than others. Rejection of repetitive content. Learning hindered by repetitive structure of topics. Learning impeded by repetition. Rejection of repetitive content.	*SAFFI* *it's alright* *SAFFI* *It was fine* *NADIA* *like you've already talked about in the same lesson. So it's just kind of pointless to talk about it again* *NADIA* *some lessons are similar just, like you already know.* *SASHA* *We had a drama about periods. [girls laugh and talk over each other]* *MIA* *Someone performed, like, having your period.* *NADIA* *You talk about bullying, and that yeah.* *MIA* *we kind of get what it is. And we always say the same stuff over and over again*	**L46,P.2** **L21,P.1** **L135,P.5** **L108,P.4** **L1607, P.56** **L1627, P.57** **L1573, P.55** **L1378, P.48**

Rejection of Catholic ethos	Doesn't understand why abortion is taught in RE but not other subjects. Perception of Catholicism as hindering LGBT content. Uncomfortable with staff expression of Catholic sexual/moral values. Negative experience with teacher Differentiates Catholicism from self. Frustration with Catholic perspective on LGBT issues. Perceived tension between progressive values and religion. Religion as chosen by individual. Mitigation of school religious values. Desire to know about abortion from non-religious perspective.	*MIA* *We do that in RE, I don't know why* *SASHA* *There's going to be gay people, there's going to be trans people. Yeah, you just have to put it aside* *NADIA* *like she can't like express that, I don't think, because people feel uncomfortable.* *SAFFI* *like, what Catholics think about this kind of thing.* *SASHA* *I think you always need to put religion aside. Get an atheist teacher, so that person is not biased*	**L658,P. 23** **L2106, P.73** **L2137, P.74** **L551,P. 20** **L2104, P.73**

Normalisation of Sexual Harassment	Indifference towards sexual harassment in school. Slut shaming not wholly gendered – perceives behaviour in girls too. Normalisation of sexualised name calling. Sexual harassment as part of normalised audio landscape of school. Prevalence of sexual harassment leads to entrenchment in school experience. Prevalence of SH reduces impact Words less impactful than actions Tension between severity of SH and appearance of indifference. Distancing self from experience of sexual harassment. Sexualised name calling as part of girl's school world. Sexual harassment as 'in school' experience.	*SAFFI* *I don't care* *SAFFI* *Sometimes girls say it.* *SAFFI* *I think it's just like an everyday kind of thing.* *Multiple speakers* *Yeah you will [hear it around][laughter}* *LILY* *Because it's just like so normal that people's call us that. Everyone just says it* *SASHA* *it's just a word. It doesn't have any actual meaning anymore?* *NADIA* *They know how serious it is.* *MIA* *I've never had it said to me, but I can, You can like hear it around* *SASHA* *they just call it that. And then you think it's a normal thing?*	**L457 P.16** **L485,P. 17** **L408,P. 15** **L440,P. 16** **L415,P. 15** **L460,P. 16** **L474,P. 17** **L436,P. 16** **L404,P. 14**

Lack of understanding from male peers	Lack of empathy from male peers. Fears not understood by male peers. Lack of empathy from male peers. Lack of accountability from male peers. Feel unable to communicate with male peers about feeling unsafe. Negative responses from male peers. Gendered tension. Negative responses from male friends to Negative reactions to menstruation from male friends Perceived divide in boy's awareness of Desire for empathy and understanding in heterosexual relationships. Desire for partners to understand experience of menstruation. Desire for male peers to understand experience of menstruation. Barriers in communication with male friends. Desire for mutual gender understanding in any personal relationships.	*NADIA* *Some think they don't have to know it's like* *LILY* *Some just don't think it's real.* *MIA* *I just think some don't care if i'm honest. Some people, some boys just don't really care about it.* *SASHA* *Or they'll be like it's 'not all men'.* *LILY* *say it'd be awkward, talking about it. You know, with this tension like* *SAFFI* *we always get that when we're on our period.* *NADIA* *Like when we're moody.* *ELLA* *Some guys, who are like educated are okay* *ELLA* *if they have sisters, or have a good approach on it, okay.* *SAFFI* *they don't understand, but they should know that it's just like periods.* *MIA* *'cuz then they get to learn about like, our experiences.* *SAFFI* *I don't think I'd talk to them about stuff like that.* *NADIA* *They're gonna have a girlfriend or a daughter. They're gonna have to deal with stuff like that*	**L1703, P.59** **L926,P. 32** **L929,P. 33** **L933,P. 33** **L967,P. 34** **L1720, P.60** **L1713, P.60** **L1697, P.59** **L948** **L1758, P.61** **L1731, P.60** **L960,P. 34** **L1748, P.61**

Gender segregation in primary	Shared experience of Secrecy around content taught to boys Same content taught separately to boys/girls. In primary Gender segregated classes in primary school. Normalisation of gender segregated RSE classes in primary school.	*SASHA* *It said 'do not disturb' on the door.* *MIA* *I think they watched the same videos as us. We watched the video in the hall and they watched it in like the classrooms.* *SAFFI* *Yeah , that's what they did for us.*	**L1638, P.57** **L1630, P.57** **L1614, P.56**
Feeling unsafe	Tension between normalisation and discomfort. Background anxiety of unsolicited content. Relentlessness of online SH. Strangers as primary instigators. Feels unsafe in public as a woman. Fear of violence against women. Feels unsafe at night. SH as prevalent experience. Experience of online SH. Shared experience of receiving unsolicited sexual content on snapchat. Shared experience of receiving unsolicited sexual content on snapchat. Strangers as primary perpetrators of Broadly positive perception of peers in Name calling rooted in slut shaming. Boy's as principle instigators of SH. Fear of sharing school space with those enacting unwanted attention.	*SAFFI* *I think it's just like an everyday kind of thing. Think they take it as a joke.* *SAFFI* *but I never open the messages because you never know what it's gonna be.* *SASHA* *there's always going to be a next person to block.* *SAFFI* *Oh god No. Random people.* *LILY* *but as a as a woman going outside, it's low key a bit [pause]* *SAFFI* *especially in the dark, with it getting dark earlier* *MIA* *I walked home like in the pitch black last night. It was really [unclear]* *LILY* *I always get sent some stuff.* *SASHA* *Yeah on snapchat you get like random people adding you.* *SAFFI* *People call other people like sluts and that.*	**L408,P. 15** **L1271, P.44** **L1280, P.45** **L1287, P.45** **L901,P. 32** **L905,P. 32** **L911,P. 32** **L1260, P.44** **L1266, P.44** **L447,P. 16**

Empathy for male experiences	Aware of limitations of gender effecting boys. Concern their presence may heighten gendered insecurities for boys. Critique of gendered expectations of Aware of potential discomfort of male peers. Desire for emotionally expressive partners. Complicated nature of gendered social structures. Empathy towards male experience. Critique of hegemonic masculinity/pressure on men. Tension between discomfort and desire for mutual understanding. Rejection of limiting expectations of boys. Doesn't experience negative comments. Need for mutual understanding both ways. Desire to understand male expressions of Distinct experience of having male friends. Interactions with boys in RSE context no different to normal school interactions.	*LILY* *they kind of grew up to, like, don't express their feelings. They're just holding it inside.* *SASHA* *they don't want to seem weak or something?* *SASHA* *they're expected to be like, strong and not talk about it, but I think some boys do, like, feel, they just can't talk about it [pause] Especially with their friends.* *SASHA* *Sasha: 'Like male teachers talking about their experiences' (L1808* *SAFFI* *They might feel uncomfortable with like, if girls are in the room* *SAFFI* *I prefer if they cried and told me how they're feeling.* *LILY* *I feel like there's like this stereotype like 'Boys Don't Cry'.* *NADIA* *We don't really care if like, they're weak* *LILY* *Yeah, I don't get that that much.* *SAFFI* *Because we, we hang around like mainly like boys.* *SAFFI* *Boys feeling [pause] because they don't really express it?*	**L1784, P.62** **L1834, P.64** **L1777, P.62** **L1808** **L1829, P.64** **L1877, P.65** **L1783, P.62** **L1872, P. 65** **L1716, P.60** **L1719, P.60** **L1773, P.62**

Familiarity as key for comfort	Communication conditional on comfort. Desire for familiarity when speaking to staff about Relationships. Feelings in lesson depend on people Teacher viewed as potential option for advice, but hinged on comfort level. Comfort depends on familiarity with peers. Desire for trusted authority figure. Peer networks as preferred source of advice. Uncomfortable discussing RSE topics with people she doesn't have established relationship with Sense of ease discussing relationships with friends. Desires more personal connection with staff member.	*P 1* *Depends on your relationship.* *MIA* *if you've had your teacher for ,like, two years you'd speak to them.* *SAFFI* *it depends who you sit next to I think.* *ELLA* *you would just ask your teacher, if you felt comfortable with it.* *ELLA* *It depends how close you are.* *NADIA* *I'd probably go to my friends.* *SAFFI* *you have to sit next to someone like you don't know. And then you have to talk about that* *SAFFI* *because you've known them for longer, so yeah* *ELLA:* *I'll go to Miss [Teaching staff in room] [laughter] but other teachers I can't.* *.*	**L1023, P.36** **L1447, P.50** **L70,P.3** **L190,P.7** **L838,P.29** **L1489, P.52** **L81,P.3** **L225,P.8** **L1452**

Feeling unsupported in mental health	Unsatisfied by school approach to mental health Dissatisfied with approach to mental health education. Frustrated with lack of nuance and detail in mental health content. Need for broader view of mental health. Desire for increased focus on mental Structural/capacity issues with pupil support system in school. Structural/capacity issues with pupil support system in school. Need for more effective whole school approach to mental health Feels ignored by current support structures. Assumption that mental health can be used for attention Negative perception of self-diagnosis of mental illness.	*LILY* *it addressed, but it's not* *SAFFI* *Not to an extent.* *SASHA* *They don't talk about like, the different types of depression.* *NADIA* *They're always just like 'We're busy. Get out'.* *MIA* *I feel like in pupil support, they help you but it's not, like that useful.* *MIA* *I also feel like the main people are allowed in, but then..* *SAFFI* *some people do it for attention.*	**L1889, P.66** **L1892, P.66** **L1899, P.66** **L1968, P.68** **L1972, P.69** **L1977, P.69** **L1941, P.67**

School as Proactive	Development of learning from pupil voice. School interventions seen to reduced harassment. School interventions altering boy's behaviour towards girls. School interventions reducing experience of SH. Concerned by pupil disclosure (of negative staff experience) Active generation of learning content from pupil voice. Desire to learn from pupil voice. Sexism as pinnacle of desired topics within current RSE model. Engaged in discussion of gender equality. Staff desire to build content around pupil Desire to support pupil needs. Perceives school as proactive around sexual harassment. Inclusion of pronouns in RSE viewed as keeping up with current cultural landscape.	*Teacher* *Would you need a lesson, like, on The Pill?* *SASHA* *people have been less calling other girls and stuff.* *SAFFI* *Don't really do it anymore.* *Teacher* *Is that person still here?* *Teacher* *Do you think that's what it is?* *SAFFI* *they're already doing stuff like sexism really?* *SAFFI* *We talked about equality,* *Teacher* *Would you be comfortable having period lessons with boys?* *SAFFI* *the kind of time we're living in so there's loads of different pronouns. So I think it's good we started learning them*	**L2274, P.79** **L396,P. 14** **L492,P. 17** **L2145, P.74** **L1840, P.64** **L281,P. 10** **L14,P.1** **L1723, P.60** **L161,P. 6**

Catholicism as authoritative voice	Challenges in expressing non-Catholic values in lesson. Religion as hard boundary. Perception of Catholicism as authoritative voice in school – and PSHE. Content on contraception and abortion built around Catholic views of conception. Classroom as point of controversy when abortion is taught. Perceived lack of religious diversity in school.	*SAFFI* *They say their side but like, yeah, they let other people think about it sometimes* *SASHA* *You can't really push that.* *ELLA* *You get like, told advice on it.* *SASHA* *they were talking about how like, when a baby's like, conceived? Like, has a life and a soul, and a spirit and stuff like that* *LILY* *It gets a bit controversial.* *LILY* *there's like different religions in other schools, but in this school you've mainly got Catholic.*	**L691,P. 24** **L524,P. 19** **L502,P. 18** **L645,P. 23** **L674,P. 24** **L598,P. 21**
Normalisation of Catholic values	Indifference towards Catholic lens. Imbedded nature of Catholic values in RE/PSHE. Indifference towards Catholic lens. Secular schooling as othered experience. Normalisation of Catholic education Indifferent to religious teachings on abortion. Catholic schooling as distinct experience. Catholic sexual values as negligible. Didn't observe Catholic lens within gender content.	*ELLA* *It's just one of the things.* *SAFFI* *they'll give you like the Catholic version of that.* *SAFFI* *Not really sure what they do in like, normal, schools. Well, not normal, non-Catholic schools* *SAFFI* *I've only been to a Catholic school.* *SAFFI* *It's fine.* *LILY* *it's just like different.*	**L560,P. 20** **L549,P. 19** **L538,P. 19** **L531,P. 19** **L668,P. 24** **L605,P. 21**

Anxiety and loneliness of not knowing	Fear of being in a harmful relationship Feels ill-equipped to support peers. Desire for moral guidance in relationships, i.e. determining right from wrong. Desire to learn from other's experiences. Desire to learn from other's experiences. Feelings of isolation and loneliness. Desire for moral guidance in relationship. Desire for moral relationships guidance. Feels unprepared/inadequate. Need for experience based learning. Discomfort opening up with friends. Feels unexperienced and unknowledgeable. Wants relationships *advice* within RSE	*SASHA* *..you might not realise you're in a bad relationship.* *MIA* *Probably not.* *SAFFI* *Just to see like signs, like what's right and what's wrong?* *LILY* *Loads of people share their stories online?* *SASHA* *because she's been through everything. So it's like, I can learn from her experiences* *ELLA* *then you know you're not going through it alone* *SASHA* *Obviously, you don't really know what's right and wrong in your relationships, since you've not really been in one* *NADIA* *like advice?*	**L758,P. 27** **L1413, P.49** **L325,P. 12** **L1233, P.43** **L2331, P.81** **L817,P. 29** **L755,P. 27** **L319,P. 12**

Desire to feel prepared	Aware that relationships are not monolithic. Desire for framework to understand relationships. Desire for future partners to be prepared/educated. Desire to support peers as best as possible. Desire to be empathetic. Sex as inevitability. Desire to feel prepared and safe. Desire to support friends safely/properly. Desire to support friends. Desire to make safe choices. Desire to feel prepared for relationships Need for education. Desire for preparedness over prohibition. Desire to make healthy, informed decisions. Desire to feel prepared. Understanding menstruation as necessity regardless of gender. Desire to be in safe, healthy relationship. Desire to be recognised as responsible? Urgency of need for information increases with age. Desire for individual identity.	*MIA* *Depends on your relationship* *SAFFI* *they should know that it's just like periods.* *SASHA* *I know what I wouldn't do. I think I'd, I don't think I would go to a teacher* *SASHA* *we should talk about it, like talk about safe sex and stuff? Because it's inevitable* *SASHA* *it's really difficult to know how to respond and how to react properly when you haven't really been told* *SAFFI* *I think you should support your friends* *SASHA* *you should teach them how to do it properly and safely.* *MIA* *it's like, you need to be educated on it* *MIA* *you shouldn't get it, but in case you do, use advice and stuff* *SASHA* *If you're not ready you shouldn't do it. And if you are, here's what you should do.* *LILY* *I feel like some of us aren't mature enough to like, understand everything* *NADIA* *It's a lot less pressure to learn when you're in year seven.*	**L1023, P.36** **L1758, P.61** **L1416, P.49** **L625,P. 22** **L1997, P.69** **L2041, P.71** **L1310, P.46** **L1558, P.54** **L1320, P.46** **L2199, P.76** **L1541, P.54** **L2233, P.78**

Dissatisfied with lack of inclusivity	Additional difficulties for LGBT pupils. Feels prejudice within school environment. Unsatisfied with school coverage of gender identity. Dissatisfied with unnuanced 'protected characteristics' approach. Feels gender isn't addressed in school. Not all types of relationship addressed within school content.	*MIA* *if you're not straight, it will be more harder for you.* *MIA* *I guess it's harder for gay people to be in a relationship like publicly.* *LILY* *We had one lesson on it, it was literally like 15 minutes about it,* *NADIA* *She talked about, like, the difference between like gender and what you're born with?* *MIA* *We just did like, definitions* *ELLA* *Sometimes it depends on what type I guess*	**L1032, P.36** **L1049, P.37** **L2062, P.72** **L2071, P.72** **L2066, P.72** **L273,P. 10**
Life beyond school	Awareness of plural narratives. School as a fraction of whole social world. Experience of plural narratives. Pre-existing social awareness of divorce. Social networks extend beyond school. Relationships develop within external peer networks.	*ELLA* *All like different compared to Catholic school.* *MIA* *you talk to people outside of school, and yeah, we have friends. And yeah, it's not like, the school is like the only side to it.* *NADIA* *They talked about divorce or that. Yeah. Which everybody knows about?* *MIA* *Through like friends out of school?* *ELLA* *But people choose their own religion more, so they have their own values.*	**L584,P. 21** **L566,P. 20** **L153,P. 6** **L1360, P.47** **L508 ,P.18**

Experiences not reflected	Inconsistent relevance of PSHE. Desire for education grounded in her social world. Hidden experiences. Feels lived reality is ignored in school. Content mismatched to needs. Lived experience not captured in PSHE. Can't relate to marital relationships focus. Feels adolescent relationships are overlooked in school's relationships content. Marriage as centre of school RSE. Adolescent Needs not addressed.	*NADIA* *Sometimes, yeah, I think it depends on the topic* *MIA* *the teachers like haven't grown up where there's a load of sexualities* *ELLA* *You don't know their side of the story, really.* *SAFFI* *I think I'd do about our age relationships* *SASHA* *They just basically talk about depression. And that's it...not everyone has depression* *NADIA* *they do like older ones. But then again, there's like relationships our age.* *NADIA* *some people have a boyfriend and girlfriend, but they don't talk about that as much as marriage or divorce*	**L1371, P.48** **L344,P. 12** **L826,P. 29** **L874,P. 31** **L1898, P.66** **L291,P. 11** **L302,p .11**

Aligning self as ally	Rejection of homophobic prejudice. Recognition of fluidity of sexual identity. Rejection of homophobia. Normalisation of discussing sexuality. Decreasing prejudice to LGBT identities. Feel confident supporting friends around relationships and sexuality. Desire for anti-prejudice content on gender identity. Association of modernity and sexual diversity. Frustrated by prejudice faced by trans/nb Heighted awareness of gender identity. Aware of stigma faced by gender non- Rejection of expression of anti-LGBT Confident articulating and understanding experiences of LGBT pupils. Pupil perspectives as non-homogenous. Desire to understand experiences outside the self. Learning through exposure to other positionalities and experiences. Questioning heteronormativity.	*SAFFI* *because they're gay now doesn't change them* *SASHA* *I think there's less stigma about being just openly gay* *ELLA* *Because there's like, especially on social media, like you know about it more, because people talk about it.* *NADIA* *I think we need to talk about how that can change. And that doesn't make [pause] you any less of a person.* *SASHA* *like a modern society. There's going to be gay people, there's going to be trans people* *ELLA* *it's not their issue, but they're going through. So you don't really need your opinion.* *SAFFI* *the kind of time we're living in so there's loads of different pronouns* *ELLA* *Like people? like different cultures. So you're learning different things* *SASHA* *if you see a straight, lots of straight people, you just automatically think that that's like the default*	**L2041, P.71** **L2031, P.71** **L2019, P.70** **L2073, P.72** **L2106, P.73** **L2097, P.73** **L160,P. 6** **L590,P. 21** **L1217, P.43**

Mistrust of teacher intervention	Adult intervention intensifies problem. Mistrust of school intervention. Discomfort with teachers as source of Some staff more trustworthy than others. Teacher positionality as limitation. Teachers unanimously not perceived as a first point of contact for information Tension between staff views and pupil views. Staff religious views as potentially leading. Shocked by staff behaviour. Staff behaviour understood as malicious. Barriers to communication with staff. Gap in adult knowledge around sexual harassment. Teacher awareness of limitations of own positionality. Teacher positionality/identity as hinderance to debate. Sense that teachers don't understand or experience current sexual cultures. Anxiety of consequence of criticising staff. Impact of staff views/ behaviour on Anger/shock at perceived targeted staff behaviour. Recognises limitations faced by staff.	*SASHA* *I don't think I would go to a teacher because I think that I'll just make everything a bit worse,* *SASHA* *will just blow everything out of proportion.* *ELLA* *You know, I wouldn't really go to a teacher* *SASHA* *I feel like it's hard as a Catholic teacher to talk about sexuality* *ELLA* *if they have like views, about like that strongly, and some people, I don't think they should talk about it.* *SAFFI* *They would say 'well, I can't really say my opinion on it,' right? Because it might be like, lead you more that way* *SAFFI* *She Looked at like the gay people as well and was like, you cannot get married.* *SASHA* *you talk to a teacher, they might like look down on you* *ELLA* *because it's an RE teacher, I think it's just Catholic.* *MIA* *They don't really know anything about it, either.* *ELLA* *I don't want to be mean to the teacher, like she's nice, I don't think she meant it in that way.*	**L1416, p.49** **L1419, P.49** **L1440, P.50** **L515,P. 18** **L2162, P.75** **L2122, P.23** **L2141, P.74** **L1460, P.51** **L688,P. 24** **L346,P. 12** **L2148, P.75**

Gendered sexual expectations	Toxic relationships harder to navigate than broadly expected. Feeling of gendered pressure around sex. Fear of being pressured into sexual Pressure enacted by male partners. Fear intensified due to hearing other peoples experiences. Fear of sexual pressure. Feeling pressurised by unwanted romantic Difficulty enacting autonomy to say no. Difficulty enacting autonomy to say no. Distinct social expectations for young women in romantic relationships. Rumours about other's behaviour create pressure to so the same. Gendered experiences as isolating. Social pressure created by others.	*ELLA* *people think it's easy... But then some people are like too attached.* *ELLA* *I mean, you just hear this and that. Some girls have to do this. Because of guys.* *SASHA* *like pressure as well. If you're not ready you shouldn't do it.* *NADIA* *then they'll like, pressure you into like, going out with them or something* *MIA* *i can't really explain it, Guys, if a girl like them, they don't really get pressured to do anything. But if a girl, if a guy likes a girl, then like everybody's talking about it. It's big thing?* *NADIA* *because like there's rumours that other people have done stuff. And then other people haven't.* *MIA* *like other people shouldn't tell you what you should be doing and like how you should be acting in a relationship,* *Nadia* *It's not like you could avoid them when you go to school with them?* *MIA* *like certain people say there's like certain girls that do it. And, and certain girls that don't*	**L264,P. 10** **L715,P. 25** **L2199, P.76** **L766,P. 27** **L792,P. 28** **L738,P. 26** **L1105, P.39** **L773,P. 27** **L729 P.26**

Fear of sexual consequence	Desire to defend reputation of friends. Sex detracts from reputation. Sex effects reputation negatively. Fear of punishment for perceived inappropriate behaviour. Fear of unwanted pregnancy. Fear of engaging in behaviour for wrong reasons. Sexual reputation creates standards to live up to. Reputational damage dependent on relationship status. Anxiety of engaging in relationships for 'wrong' reasons.	*SASHA* *I get shocked because I hear a lot of stuff about my friends. It's just a bit upsetting because they haven't.* *SASHA* *maybe sanctions and stuff because you're not really meant to be doing that* *SASHA* *You'd rather talk about it than have like a teen pregnancy.* *MIA* *people shouldn't like base you off, like your relationship or something like that* *SASHA* *if there's like rumours going around about a girl, that boy would expect that girl to do stuff* *MIA* *I think it depends really.* *LILY* *that people our age, sometimes don't understand what an actual relationship is. And they just get into relationships, because they want to have the concept of being in a relationship*	**L1133, P.40** **L1461, P.51** **L626,P. 22** **L1108, P.39** **L1082, P.38** **L1158, P.40** **L1537, P.54**

Sex negative moral framework	Moral construction of sex and Monogamy as desirable outcome. Reproduction held as pinnacle of adult relationships. Sex as less appropriate than menstruation. Expectations of friend to not be involved in sexual behaviours.. Distinction between appropriate and inappropriate relationships. Relationships morally superior to casual Predefined moral standard of sexual Sex as prohibited behaviour.	*ELLA* *You just realise, oh that's good, that's bad.* *SASHA* *If people don't know they're together, then it's just like a bit [pause] of a worse situation* *NADIA* *Probably because you can't have children at our age.* *SAFFI* *periods and that, I definitely would speak to my mum about, but like, not sex.* *SASHA* *everyone thinks they have. Like, they act a certain way, but they're really not* *SASHA* *if they're in a relationship. It's more like, 'Oh, you've done it' it's not like 'urgh [disgust noise] you've done it'.* *SASHA* *you're not really meant to be doing that.*	**L1569, P.55** **L1173, P.41** **L335,P. 12** **L2324, P.81** **L1135, P.40** **L1161, P.41** **L1462, P.51**

Content inappropriate for life-stage	Need for content to match needs at each stage of education. Content mismatched to knowledge level. Desire for content matched to actual life stage and experience. Needs not met at point of relevance. Relationships increasingly important in secondary school. Content being delivered too late. Desire for foundation of information early Need for content to accurately develop to Needs not met at age appropriate point. Needs not being met at relevant stage. Point of relevance incorrectly defined by Desired relationship outcomes distinct from adult relationship outcomes.	*MIA* *we kind of get what it is. And we always say the same stuff over and over again* *SASHA* *It's like, 'Why didn't you tell me that three years ago?'* *ELLA* *You wouldn't really care about stuff that you would now* *NADIA* *It's a lot less pressure to learn when you're in year seven.* *LILY* *If you learn it in year seven, you're more educated as the years go by.* *ELLA* *as years go by, it should like raise, like with your maturity.* *SAFFI* *So you're not just learned about something, like, now, when it could've been like normalised.* *NADIA* *we're not thinking about marriage.#* *SASHA* *'I don't think you're like aware of it. Like, throughout year seven, that's when you're going to get like snapchat, Instagram and that. They don't really talk to you about that.' (L1303)*	**L1378, P.48** **L1580, P.55** **L1591, P.55** **L2233, P.78** **L2240, P.78** **L2215, P.77** **L2229, P.77** **L301,P. 11** **L1303**

Family as trusted source	Trusts mother. Close relationship with Mother. Family as judgement free Family as trustworthy source. Learnt from family rather than school. Parents as principle source of information on periods.	*NADIA* *My mom.* *SASHA* *I tell my mom everything...she doesn't just like judge.* *L* *LILY* *Yeah, I'm comfortable. Like we talk about like, anything. It's like, same gender.* *ELLA* *I would talk to, like, my older brother. 'Cuz He's like, much more older and more experienced* *LILY* *I'd say I learnt it with my family.* *SAFFI* *I think my parents...*	**L2306, P.80** **L2328, P.81** **L860,P. 30** **L1482, P.52** **L1655, P.58** **L1651, P.57**

Mistrust of family	Anxiety around parental knowledge of sexual behaviour. Lack of privacy in family. Fear of parental judgement. Discomfort with parental involvement in accessing medical care. Some topics deemed inappropriate for parents. Negative reactions from family. Parents Overstepping boundaries Discomfort discussing sex with parents. Barriers to medical care. Assumption father would have issue with daughter asking about sex/relationships.	*LILY* *- it's because parents would find out.* *MIA* *I feel like it would get spread around the family?* *MIA* *Mom and dad both. They're the last people I would go to* *NADIA* *I'd have to ask my mom to take me to the GP, and my Mom would be like, why?* *ELLA* *Yeah, like family drama [laughs]* *MIA* *when I told my mom that I got a period she literally just went around the whole family [laughs].* *ELLA* *Periods, that would be fine, like it's like a normal thing. But it's anything else* *SASHA* *My dad would not be okay about that.* *LILY* *I'd feel more comfortable talking to my sister.*	**L2298, P.80** **L2343, P.81** **L2312, P.80** **L2291, P.80** **L2346, P.81** **L2349, P.82** **L2329, P.81** **L2309, P.80** **L854,P. 30**

Lack of privacy in family.

Learning through experience	Aware of medical value of pill beyond contraception. Learning from monthly life experience. Forced to deal with menstruation out of necessity. Learning through life experience Visibility of embodied experience of periods Experience of menstruation within school social structures. Knowledge rooted in peer's experiences. Menstrual education by life experience	*SAFFI* *It's just people get it when they're 12, once a month.* *SAFFI* *Just like you get it once a month. Deal with it. [laughter]* *SASHA* *I didn't know about that until someone pointed it out.* *ELLA* *I think people would. Because like, when I'm in class when the cramps are getting bad, I'm dying* *NADIA* *Just life experience? or like other friends, who told them and then they'll tell you.* *LILY* *Yeah. I had to!*	**L1662, P.58** **L1670, P.58** **L2266, P.79** **L1689, P.59** **L1511, P.53** **L1648, P.57**

Social media as learning tool	Social media as learning tool. Social media bolsters visible diversity Group consensus – TikTok as particularly formative for knowledge around gender Social media as central to knowledge base on sexuality and gender. Understanding of sexuality enhanced by social media. Views of relationships shaped by social media. Awareness of gender diversity bolstered by interacting with others via social Social media as relationships education Social media enhances understanding of other gendered experiences.	*ELLA* *especially on social media, like you know about it more, because people talk about it.* *SASHA* *I think it's more about like, diversity. What you what you, what you see is kind of what you expect* *LILY* *and the people that are on social media* *MIA* *with sexuality. Like, there's celebrities aren't straight, and you think that is okay because* *LILY* *I would say that on social media you learn more about relationships, and how like, you can like, you know, like stuff, traits that are bad.* *SAFFI* *keep seeing like Tik Toks about that for some reason. It's, it's like someone crying and then it's like, then it's them saying, 'Oh, wait, I forgot. I'm a boy'*	**L2019, P.70** **L1216, P.42** **L174,P. 7** **L1208, P.42** **L1230, P.43** **L1789, P.62**
Lack of reliable sources	No specific trusted sources online. Unverified/unreliable information	*SAFFI* *Googling, yeah, just find like an article somewhere* *SAFFI* *I don't know, I don't know.*	**L249,P. 9** **L1508, P.53**

Frustration with teaching approach	Critical of prohibitive approach to social Dogmatic approach ineffective. Frustrated with unrealistic approach to harmful relationships.	*SASHA* *instead of telling you not to get it, 'cuz people are gonna get it,* *SAFFI* *Teachers just say it's like not a good idea to get it and you shouldn't get it. They don't really explain like, why.* *SASHA* *It's a lot harder than just calling Childline and then it's all sorted*	**L1309, P.46** **L1316, P.46** **L1394, P.49**

Feeling deprived of information	Received practical education but little else. Silence around periods. Primary school lacked practical menstrual education. Frustration at delayed content. Perceives negative aspects of sex and relationships as topic that should be Need for effective information. Deprived of explanation. Frustration at lack of preparation for this experience earlier in school. Feeling of being deprived of information. Feels contraception is absent from PSHE. Feel ill-equipped by school approach to contraception. Frustrated by lack of information. Frustration with insufficient information on contraception. Desire for conversations around sexual health. Feels information is being kept from Frustration with lack of nuance towards Frustration with content. Desire for plural perspectives.	*LILY* *they only taught us how to like they taught us how to use pads and stuff like that* *MIA* *I don't think they actually teach you in primary school.* *SASHA* *'Why didn't you tell me that three years ago?'* *SAFFI* *They don't really explain like, why.* *SAFFI* *I don't think we talk about it at all in PSHE* *SASHA* *we should talk about it, like talk about safe sex and stuff?* *SASHA* *no one really talks about it. It's just unspoken.* *MIA* *if you feel like you can't get out of a toxic relationship, just call this number. Just the same thing* *SASHA* *I don't think they take a lot of context in, their relationship. They don't go into like alternative solution*	**L1665, P.58** **L1658, P.58** **L1580, P.55** **L1317, P.46** **L641,P. 23** **L635,P. 22** **L891,P. 31** **L1386, P.48** **L1401, P.49**

Reliance on peer information networks	Peer support most trusted form. Need for information on how to support Reliance on own intuition and information gathering methods. Peer support bolstered by social media. Collective preference for peer networks or online. Development of peer knowledge sharing networks. Periods discussed in informal settings but not class. Desire for unbiased information. Knowledge passed through various peer networks. Developed own methods for discerning reliable information. Recognises need for trustworthy information. Information solicited through friends or online.	*MIA* *probably speak to my friends, again.* *SAFFI* *you would just figure it out.* *ELLA* *I think we're used to it now 'cuz we talk about it more.* *SAFFI* *there's always someone that knows* *MIA* *I'll talk about it with my friends, but don't really talk about it in class.* *SASHA* *I think you always need to put religion aside.* *NADIA* *like other friends, who told them and then they'll tell you* *NADIA* *Depends how many times it's been passed. So if it's some, like, random person that I have, like one lesson with* *SAFFI* *You'd probably try to find it out on your phone or ask your friends?*	**L1989, P.69** **L197,P. 7** **L2028, P.70** **L1498, P.52** **L1680, P.58** **L2104, P.73** **L1511, P.53** **L1521, P.53** **L237,P. 9**

Fear of Judgement	Concerned about appearing mean. Fear of preconceived judgements. Fear of judgement from others. Conscious of navigating other people's judgements and feelings. Comparison to others. Fear of social judgement around engagement in sexual behaviour. Concerns about judgement of others. Anxiety around other's people's opinions of relationship. Fear of external judgement of relationships. Desire for control of other's perceptions. Fear of mental health stigma. Concern regarding other people's judgement. Need to be free of judgement. Fear of being shamed. Conscious of public appearance. Fear of judgement from peers.	*ELLA* *I don't want to be mean to the teacher* *SASHA* *when so many people have already views about you, it's hard to change?* *LILY* *because some people will have like real, opinions that are like, really strong. So really hard to like, try and change that.* *SAFFI* *makes us look [unclear]* *ELLA* *People, obviously, like, talk about it, because they see it happening. So it could be like, about their appearance, personality.* *SASHA* *Because if you're openly, like, almost depressed, it's like, yeah, looked down upon* *LILY* *People, like have opinions* *SASHA* *I feel you'd be, like, shamed almost, because like talking about the sex thing.* *MIA* *I know it sounds bad, but like, parents can be more judgemental.*	**L2148, P.75** **L1143, P.40** **L360,P. 13** **L746,P. 26** **L1074, P.38** **L2033, P.71** **L1039, P.36** **L1458, P.51** **L2316, P.80**

Relationships as social event	School as relationship landscape. Relationships develop within external peer networks. Dating as social event. Impact of rumours/gossip. Social network surrounding relationships. Effect of personal relationships/romantic interest on learning engagement. Romantic interest as catalyst for undesired behaviour in male peers Own behaviour unaffected by romantic interest. Dating part of school environment, Aware of adolescent dating culture. Dating as pervasive part of lived world. Relationships markedly different at secondary than primary. Effect of romantic interests on learning engagement.	*MIA* *Through like friends out of school* *ELLA* *if you see someone like walking around at school dating. People, obviously, like, talk about it* *ELLA* *if you're going through it, it's obviously different for you because you're being attacked* *MIA* *if a guy likes a girl, then like everybody's talking about it. It's a big thing?* *SAFFI* *I think it affects how they, like, behave a lot.* *ELLA* *they act more silly.* *NADIA* *I think it's everywhere.* *SAFFI* *that was just kind of like, like holding hands, and like fake getting married [laughter].* *SAFFI* *They might feel uncomfortable with like, if girls are in the room, I don't know, like, if they've got a crush in there -*	**L1360, P.47** **L1073, P.38** **L1189, P.42** **L794,P. 28** **L1856, P.65** **L1859, p.65** **L1003, P.35** **L1596, P.56** **L1829, P.64**

Resilience	Doesn't associate any challenges with Aware of risks. Confident in own safety precautions. Heightened awareness of risks online. Self-aware of age and life-stage. Enacting own management of harassment. Enacting self-protective measures online. Confident exercising autonomy. Recognises complexity of exiting abusive relationships. Awareness of lack of life experience. Adolescent life-stage as non-monolithic. Distinctions between permissible adult behaviours and YP behaviours	*SAFFI* *No, can't think of anything.* *MIA* *you shouldn't get it, but in case you do, use advice* *SAFFI* *Yeah. I do [feel safe navigating social media]* *MIA* *I don't think you should have relationship online? If it's like, someone you don't know, at our age, maybe when you're older?* *SASHA* *Well I just block them* *SAFFI* *but I never open the messages because you never know what it's gonna be.* *SASHA* *It's a lot harder than just calling Childline and then it's all sorted.* *LILY* *because I feel that people our age, sometimes don't understand what an actual relationship is* *LILY* *some people our age are like really mature, but other people not really mature enough.*	**L378,P. 14** **L1320, P.46** **L1330, p.46** **L1341, P.47** **L1279, P.45** **L1271, P.44** **L1394, P.49** **L1537, P.54** **L1549, P.54**

Appendix L – Stage Three Analysis (School B)

Pupil Focus Group 2
Stage 3: Mapping Superordinate and Emergent Themes.

Speaker key: multiple/Ruby/Ada/Krista/Nisha/Chloe/teacher

Superordinate Theme	Emergent Themes	Transcript Quotations	Line Number
RSE evoking confusion	Limited memory of topics covered. Struggle to remember content delivered. Contradicting memories of content. Discrepancy between teacher and student memory of content delivered. Confusion around stage of content covered in lessons Confusion around stage of content covered in lessons. Confusion between different novelty concept resources. Novelty RSE resources as confusing and cringey. Struggle to remember meaning of novelty content. Difficulty discerning which topics have been useful. Gap in communication between pupil and staff on content. Confusion around family planning method portrayed in content. Confusion about dispersed nature of RSE topics. Struggle remembering details of content – concept more memorable. Confusion about 'where' RSE happens. Unsure in own analysis of usefulness of topics. Lacking confidence in own memories/interpretation of content delivered.	*RUBY* *Um, masturbation, pornography, periods, contraception. That's all I can remember to be honest.* *ADA* *They did that thing about like, what was it, I can't…like, a stable and non toxic relationships?* *Teacher* *erm, we're not sure. I think you guys did the year 9 booklets.* *KRISTA* *Did we?* *ADA* *Yeah it was something like that. I can't remember, like, um, it was, you know, the, like the two people and they were like, chatting about something, I can't remember [laughs].* *NISHA* *I'm not sure* *RUBY* *we did a bit in Biology? but I think that's only if you pick triple, I don't know.* KRISTA well, not really, for us. I can't remember the last big talk until like the year 9 one	L62, P.3 L115, P.5 L341, p.13 L351, p.13 L157, p. 6. L379, p. 14 L518 P.19 L493, P.18

Clarity as key to understanding	Values provision of an example of concepts. Tea analogy valued due to simplicity. Novelty concept of 'tea' resource perceived as beneficial due to clarity.	*NISHA* *I think it was alright. Because yeah, made sense. And it like made a point of giving consent in general. So it was like an example* *RUBY* *it was pretty ,like ,basic so anyone could get it if they wanted to.*	L177, P.7 L187 P.7
Novel topics as key events	Watching live birth in primary school as notable and controversial event. 'headline' topics are memorable. "tea' consent video particularly memorable Novelty video concept remembered over content/topic. Primary school puberty content as cringey and humorous. Perceived impossibility of seeing an actual birth Pleasure focused topics as more taboo thus novel.	*RUBY* *Did you watch that video of the woman, like, [hushed voice] giving birth?* *KRISTA* *well, periods and sex and then like porn and all the different things* *multiple speakers* *oh the tea! yeah.* *ADA* *With the, the ice cream smoothies or something?* *KRISTA* *Yeah, we had the puberty talk [laughs]* *NISHA* *so we watched videos of like, women giving birth, Well, not actually.* *KRISTA* *Periods and like sex are repetitive, but we also did masturbation and porn.*	L262 P.10 L45 P.2 L122 P.5 L117 P.5 L230 P.9 L269 P.10 L383 P.14

Social and sexual pressure	Anxiety around sexual pressure. Fear of falling behind peers. Fear of being 'left behind' if not engaging in relationships. Social pressure to be in relationship. Comparison to others. Social pressure of others getting into relationships. Sex and relationships as source of stress and anxiety. Abstract awareness of normative expectations of teenagers.	*KRISTA* *I think it should be something that you're comfortable with not something you're pressured into.* *ADA* *because like, everyone else is sort of getting in one.* *KRISTA* *'cuz, like, let's say you didn't have a lot of friends and then your only friend got a boyfriend, then?* *RUBY* *'cuz if your friend's like dating someone then you feel like more pressure to start and stuff.* *ADA* *how it's not actually that important to worry so much about, like, for example, like losing your virginity and getting in relationships really early.* *NISHA* *Well, obviously, this is the age where you start liking people, is it not?.*	L1627, P.59 L1651, P.60 L1294, P.47 L1277, P.46 L1653 P.60 L1265, P.46

Normalisation of gender segregation at Primary.	Mixed gender RSE lessons as primary seen as departure from norm. Masturbation constructed as boy's topic in primary context. Mixed gender menstrual education in primary. Menstrual education sole focus of primary content. Remembers primary RSE as always mixed gender. Periods as gender segregated topic in primary. Norm of gender segregated RSE in year 6. Assumption that boy's would be taught same content. Remembers boy's removed from classroom some topics (primary) Sense of being deprived information due to gender.	*RUBY* *We were actually together, boys and girls were together.* *KRISTA* *they did masturbation as well, but we never did that.* *ADA* *In year 5 the girls talked about periods…* *KRISTA* *Well I always thought it was the same thing?* *NISHA* *there was like some times when the boys would leave the room, but most of the time was altogether.*	L239, P.9 L317, P.12 L288, P.11 L317, P.12 L304, P.11

Discomfort discussing sex outside of school	Comfortable discussing topical sexual violence with parents but not personal relationships. Discomfort discussing sex with friends. Discomfort with discussing sex/relationships with friends outside of advice. Sexual values as taboo topic with friends Sex as off limits topic with friends. Sex as taboo topic. Humour as means to discuss sex and relationships with friends. Problematisation of forthright discussions of sex with peers.	*RUBY* *I can talk about stuff in the news with my parents all the time, like rape and sexual assault, Yeah, stuff like that. But I'm not too sure about like, the actual sex and relationships side of it.* *NISHA* *Erm, I feel like, you wouldn't just like, what, talk about it with my friends, I wouldn't just talk about it* *KRISTA* *not really like, my friends, I feel like I tell them about experiences and ask what to do, but I wouldn't, like, go to them outright.* *ADA* *I'd probably more end up like joking about something with my friends if it came up in conversation.*	L1177, P. 43 L1125, P.41 L1139 P.41 L1165 P.42

Desire to see self in RSE content	Lack of relatable relationship models in RSE resources. Cannot 'see' self in catholic relationship model. Need for visibility. Want for relatable models of LGBTQ+ sex Can't 'see herself' in Catholic relationship focus. Unable to relate to marital focus. Want for relatable relationship models. Feels excluded by heteronormative focus of resources. Desire for relatable relationships models. Disengaged as content doesn't feel relevant and inclusion of LGBTQ+ identities. Relatability = engagement. Desire for relatability. Rejection of extremely outdated personal hygiene content.	KRISTA They talk about the outcome, marriage and kids, that's it. *ADA* *It's often quite focused only on like heterosexual people. So often, it's kind of pointless for me listening to some of the stuff in it.* *KRISTA* *more on like a healthy relationship but not from a Catholic point of view* *CHLOE* *like, that's not relatable because no one here is married* *KRISTA* *A lot of the time it's because most of the thing we're taught don't apply to boys like periods* *ADA* *they showed us some weird video from the 80s about like, wearing deodorant.*	L1737 P.63 L391 P.15 L1033, P.38 L1390, P. 50 L1550, P. 5 L289, P. 11

Catholicism as authoritative voice in life	Catholicism as authoritative perspective in school. Catholicism as established voice of school. Catholicism as tied to school experience. Catholicism ideology embedded part of home and school life. Catholicism as dominant lens. Shift in religious lens from primary to secondary. Ingrained ideal of waiting until marriage. Moralistic construction of sex.	*multiple speakers Just Catholic perspective.* *RUBY* *Obviously, it is from a Catholic perspective* *NISHA* *Well, for me, my parents are Catholic anyway. So it doesn't really change.* *KRISTA* *that was mostly Catholic based,* *KRISTA* *in Primary School it wasn't anything to do with Catholicism* *NISHA* *I* *CHLOE* *even after marriage, you should, erm, wait until you actually want a child.*	L54, p.2 L421, P.16 L603, p.22 L494, P.18 L503, P.19 L1403, P.51 L1088,P.39

Catholicism as unrelatable	Othering Catholic stance from the normal. Group distancing from celibacy as ideal. Distancing Catholic perspective from own Distancing from Catholic views on contraception. Concern Catholic lens is exclusionary. Questioning Catholic construction of contraception Distancing from Cath sexual values. Shared understanding of Catholicism as other. Distancing catholic values from the norm Catholicism as outside of day to day life. Gap between own views and school messaging on sex. Rejection of presentation of casual sex. Desire for secular healthy relationship models. Catholic education failing needs of other religious positionalities. Catholic RSE lens means content unrelatable from other religious perspectives. Rejection of singular religious perspective. Desire for secular perspective on relationships. Recognises religious diversity of peers. School only one part of social network. Recognition of diverse relationship models.	*ADA* *like sort of work around that instead of using like, traditional stuff?* *ADA* *they had like, a lot of stuff about like, the Catholic view of how you should do contraception.* *CHLOE* *the Catholic side of it, it's probably less relatable for a lot of people.* *ADA* *It was like the family planning thing, I think it was, where like, you try and like, guess when your next period is?* *RUBY* *Like the Catholic perspective of waiting till marriage* *CHLOE* *They need to talk more about like relationships from like, normal people* *RUBY* *it's bad. They say in the video that it's bad, like one night stands* *KRISTA* *I think more on like a healthy relationship but not from a Catholic point of view.* *RUBY* *So other religions practice different things during sexual relationship and stuff like that, so it doesn't really help others*	L86 P.4 L69, P.3 L557, P. 20 L84, P.4 L1079, P.39 L1240, P.45 L724, P. 26 L1033, P. 37 L422, P.16

		CHLOE *I mean, like, not everyone goes to church.* *NISHA* *you could be in like, a healthy relationship but you just don't get married, but then you also do want children* *NISHA* *they could have the same like ideas on what I'd be learning.*	L560, P.21 L1415, P. 51 L1492, P.54

Forging own religious identity	Forging own religious identity. Non-religious identity. Cherry picking religious practices. Resources don't align with own Catholic practice. Practising religious identity. Shared Catholic values/identity beyond school. Distancing self from conservative Catholicism. Developing own Catholic ideology. Catholicism as non-monolithic. Want for inclusive faith. Positioning self as Ally Identifies self as ally. Identity shaped by multiple social factors – not just school.	*RUBY* *I would say I am, but in some practices, I don't, erm, take part in.* *RUBY* *In church it's more like the Bible, so it's a bit different to the videos.* *NISHA* *let's say the person is Catholic, but they just don't go to a Catholic school, they could have the same like ideas on what I'd be learning.* *RUBY* *Thing is I am Catholic, but I don't think that a lot of it is what they really teach in like the church. So, erm, like some views I just don't believe in, like, homophobia* *RUBY* *I don't really think about it like that. I'm less of a strict Catholic.* *KRISTA* *a lot of it is influenced by the people around like school and my parents and family. And then the other part is like, erm, exploring other sides of things.* *KRISTA:* *wouldn't talk from what I've like learnt, I'd talk from my, my perspective*	L591, P. 22 L639, P.23 L1488, P.54 L619, P. 23 L625, P.23 L582, P. 21 L1499, P. 54

Distrust of adults as advisors	Finds positioning of priests as information source funny. Rejection of religious figures as accessible/trusted RSE advice sources Rejection of priests as trusted RSE information source due to perceived inappropriateness. Rejection of teachers as advisors. Gap between school and own construction of trusted advice sources Notion of Dad as uncomfortable with daughter engaging in sex? Collective discomfort with dad as advice source. Discomfort with discussing sex with religious leaders?	*CHLOE* *in the videos quite often, they go into like a church and talk to a priest about what they think of the thing [giggles}* *RUBY* *that would be a bit weird* *KRISTA* *I always think that's odd because you're not gonna walk into church and be like what do you think about this* *CHLOE* *school really encourages to talk to teachers and stuff, but that's not somewhere that I'd go.* *KRISTA* *I would not walk up to my dad and be like [laughs, other girls join in] this, that and the other.*	L430, P. 16 L445, P.16 L438, P. 16 L1156, P. 42 L1137, P.41
Collective Story Telling	Collective investigation of experience. Shared view. Assistive story telling – questioning details. Assistive story telling – asking questions to prompt details. Assistive story telling – reassurance RUBY hadn't misspoken Collective story telling. Collective story telling through corrective details about video. Collective story telling by adding detail. Collective story telling.	*RUBY* *Does anyone do double science?* *KRISTA* *I do triple, I didn't do it.* *multiple speakers* *I do triple [unclear]* *KRISTA* *Was it something about flavours or?* *ADA* *Yeah it was something like that.*	L535-541, P.20 L154-157, P.6

Developing own information networks	Desire for reliable information. Google as default info source. Google as trusted source. Google as imbedded source of info. Google as trusted source. Developing own information searching techniques. Developing own info networks. Developing own info networks. Trusted sources topic dependent. Notion of other information sources humorous. Lack of criticality? Google as default source of information.	*ADA* *It's hard to find stuff that's direct and honest about what it actually is.* *KRISTA* *Just google search.* *KRISTA* *If it was something a bit more, I know a few websites, but normally it's just google.* *RUBY* *the Google box that comes up.*	L1338, P. 48 L796, P.29 L849, P.31 L836, P.30

Distancing self from reliance on social media	Distancing self from problematic social media usage. Negative construction of learning from social media. Discomfort in disclosing info sources? Conscious of confirmation bias in social media information. Almost too many views available online. school reliable in contrast to difficulty finding appropriate info online. Concerned that social media promotes reactive responses to opinions.	*RUBY* *and when people read it, they might like, just think, like, really quickly on that view.* *RUBY* *they adopt that view very quickly, without, before like understanding all of the different perspectives* *KRISTA* *I know a few websites* *NISHA* *then you choose which one you probably agree with.* *NISHA* *people obviously have different opinions, and then it just goes everywhere.* *ADA* *It can be kind of hard as well to find like stuff out about sex on the internet, because, like, often, it's like, some inappropriate*	L819, P. 30 L821, P.30 L850, P.31 L811, P.30 L808, P.29 L1336, P.48

Frustration with tokenistic approach to LGBTQ+ relationships.	Frustration with tokenistic approach to LGBTQ+ relationships. Feeling deprive of LGBTQ+ inclusive sex ed. Frustration with tokenistic coverage of LGBTQ women's relationships. Critical of tokenised approach. Limited resources for LGBTQ+ content. Positioning self as within LGBTQ+ community. Consensus – dissatisfied with LGBTQ+ resource. LGBTQ content in form not videos. LGBTQ+ content concentrated in pride month. Frustration with 'awareness' approach to LGBTQ+ identities. Silence on LGBTQ marriage.	*NISHA* *we could add more about like, obviously, like, different genders because we do do a lot of LGBTQ stuff, but then, we don't do much about it in like the sexual education* *ADA* *I think there were occasional mentions of like, a relationship where it was two women, but like...* *KRISTA* *It's only during Pride Month , not throughout the whole year.* *ADA* *these sexualities that even I've never heard of* *ADA* It's like 'so this is what a bisexual person is'	L875, P.32 L406, P.15 L904, P.33 L932, P.34 L897,P. 33
Empathy for Boy's Experiences	Positive view of boy's engagement. Desire to learn about male experiences of sexual violence. Conscious of male perspectives being obscured. Conscious of focus on female experiences of sexual violence. Desire for male peers to feel equally able to identify SA. Aware of gendered disparity in SV. Concern that current approach is failing male peers.	*NISHA* *but I do feel like they also do take it in.* *RUBY* *we should talk also about the male side of rape and sexual assault* *CHLOE* *we had a male teacher for the bit on sexual assault, but it's still all about how, um, it affects women.* *NISHA* *it's always good to like, obviously, educate the boys on, if they feel like something's wrong then at least they know what it is.*	L1531, P. 55 L982, P.36 L1001, P.36 L1023, P. 37

Desire to feel safe and prepared	Aspiring to communicative relationships. Self-awareness of lack of life experience. Desire to learn from real world examples. Want to make informed choices. Desire to feel prepared. Desire to feel safe and prepared. School content supports individual decision making. Want to make healthy relationship choices.	*NISHA* *obviously, you'll never know what to do, to be fair, like, you never know if it's right or wrong* *RUBY* *like a real life perspective? Like case studies.* *RUBY* *How to stay safe, contraception.* *KRISTA* *the main priority should be like being safe and like knowing like the consequences of your actions.* *NISHA* *I feel like it does help, like what they tell you at school? 'Cuz it just helps your decisions on what you want to do.* *KRISTA* *So like, what's normal, normal, happy, healthy*	L1266, p.46 L994, P.36 L959, P.35 L663, P.24 L1327, P.48 L1039, P.38
Feeling alienated within RSE	LGBTQ+ content as means to enhance peer understanding. Feels othered by overcomplex 'awareness' approach. Minimising exclusion of own sexual identity. Conscious of taking up space in curriculum as marginalised identity. Want for resources tailored to learning style. Excluded by content style.	*NISHA* *it would probably, like, help others understand.* *ADA* *it means often lot of straight people think it's like really weird and there's so much stuff to remember when, it's sort of overcomplicated.* *ADA* *But then again, I don't want sort of, I understand that. It's, it's a minority of people, you know, so.* *RUBY* *for other people that's not very good form of like actually learning, so it could be a bit more well rounded for everyone.*	L879, P. 32 L934, P.34 L412, P.15 L684, P.25.

anxiety not knowing	Anxiety of appearing unknowing. Want for reassurance. Want for reassurance and comfort. Anxiety of doing the 'wrong' thing in relationships. Desire to feel 'normal'.	*ADA* *you sort of have to laugh a bit about it, so you don't seem like you're sort of too nervous to talk about stuff like that* *KRISTA* *what's normal, normal, happy, healthy but not with like, 'oh, this, that and the other really should happen'* *NISHA* *you never know if it's right or wrong.*	L1575, P.57 L1039, P.38 L.1267, P.46
Feeling deprived of 'full picture' of sex and relationships information	Frustration with black/white moralistic approach to relationships in videos. Conscious of problems in risk focused approach. Feeling deprived of STI education. Feeling deprived of sexual health information. Hasn't yet received same STI content. Frustration with limited coverage of topic. Deprived of nuance. Sense of not being offered full picture. Feeling ill-equipped to navigate real relationships. Feels content not universally delivered. Positioning of self above need for simplicist messaging.	*KRISTA* *one of the things was like celibacy and then 'oh, you should be like, it shouldn't be'* *KRISTA* *I know, it sounds bad, but they point out all the bad stuff, so it's like in your face* *ADA* *I think they should focus on it more.* *CHLOE* *they don't really speak about it, except people that like, they says that they did consent to having sex with someone…* *RUBY* *we were talking about the female side of it. No one talked about the male side of it.* *KRISTA* *And then like, the pressure of actually being in a relationship is a lot more different, a lot harder to deal with* *RUBY* *we did a bit in Biology? but I think that's only if you pick triple, I don't know.*	L1052 P.38 L1350, P. 49 L521, P.19 L713, P.26 L986, P.36 L1213, P.44 L514, P.19

Adult led learning mechanisms	Whole year assemblies as RSE. Staff lived experience as teaching tool. Staff lived experience as teaching tool Lesson discussions dictated by video topic. Resources constructed as dogmatic/authoritative. Videos given authority in classroom. Whole lessons structured around video resources. RSE delivered through videos. Interactions with videos at class level rather than individual.	*KRISTA* *I can't remember the last big talk until like the year 9 one* *KRISTA* *she was being honest and like putting out there her experience.* *NISHA* *during the videos, you can like pause it, they ask you questions, and then you would talk about it as a class.* *ADA* *they had like, a lot of stuff about like, the Catholic view of how you should do contraception.*	L490, P.18 L745,P.27 L201, P.8 L71,KRISTA

Catholic Sexual Values as unattainable	Catholic relationship ideals as unrelatable. 'waiting until marriage' unrealistic and out of touch with relationship expectations. Abstinence only perceived as unrealistic. Traditional marital values unattainable Challenge of maintaining Cath sexual values. Abstinence as a limiting sexual value. Catholic sexual values as unattainable/unrealistic. Catholic values as prohibitive to relatable content. Catholicism as unrelatable. Recognition marital ideal isn't universally relatable. Risk of being swayed away from Cath values. Fear of 'falling behind' due to sexual values. Construction of abstinence until marriage as out of touch. Pressure of upkeeping abstinence. Sex as inevitability for peers	*KRISTA* *they were talking about like, how great that was for them. But like lots of people just wouldn't do that.* *KRISTA* *Let's say you're really traditional to like, have kids and everything. Well, it's harder than it sounds.* *KRISTA* *it's like the pressure to actually keep it up.* *RUBY* *But that's not how people do it.* *RUBY* *No, because it's more of a Catholic. They don't really talk about like getting into relationships.* *CHLOE* *the Catholic side of it, it's probably less relatable for a lot of people.* *NISHA* *<u>but some people obviously don't follow that,</u> I guess.* *RUBY* *I've heard stories of like, people that were like, really good, they were willing to wait till marriage, but then they went like university and then like, everything changed for them, they literally became like different people* *KRISTA* *let's say you just don't get married because no one likes you. Well, what are you gonna do?*	L458, P.17 L1448 P.52 L1438 ,P.52 L1092, P.40 L1731, P.62 L553, P.20 L1404, P.51 L1458, P.53 L1440, P.52

Trust in maternal advice	Mum as potential trusted figure. Mum as relationships role model. Mum and siblings as trusted advice source.	*ADA* *I feel like I might talk to my mum about something, maybe?* *RUBY* *I guess, my mum is already like a female role model for things like that.* *KRISTA* *I'd ask my mum. I would not walk up to my dad and be like [laughs, other girls join in] this, that and the other. My siblings? Yeah.*	L1164, P.42 L1148, P.42 L1137,P.41
Not feeling seen or heard by adults	Not feeling seen/heard by adults. Rejection of dogmatic approach to relationships in resources. Frustration with authoritative voice in resources. Want for guidance not instruction. Rejection of adult led policy creation. Want for agency in policy design. Desire for youth input. Division between collective pupil identity and school/church identity. Perception of homogenous school/adult identity. Desire for youth participation in policy landscape	*RUBY* *but they don't understand how pupils will take it.* *KRISTA* *it was mostly like a list of what should be in and like not really what it should look like for yourself.* *KRISTA* *just wouldn't want them to write it.* *RUBY* *young people should be involved in their education rather than older people making decisions for them.* *ADA* *I think they don't focus enough on...* *CHLOE* *they should take into consideration the opinions of the young people that are, like, going to learn it.*	L1758, P.63 L1041, P.38 L1751, P.63 L1760, P.63 L1651, P.60 L1770, P.64

Imbedded Catholic sexual values in RSE	Abstinence only main messaging received from video content. Perceives procreative Marriage as goal of school approach. Marriage only taught in context of permissible sex. Marital sex presented as solely procreative Dominant school messaging is discouraging sex/relationships. Conscious that sex for pleasure is problematised.	*ADA* *the main point of contraception was like celibacy though* *KRISTA* *<u>They talk about the outcome, marriage and kids, that's it.</u>* *RUBY* *like sex after marriage. Things like that, but we never actually fully just talked about marriage* *KRISTA* *it should not be, like, something about pleasure. It should be something about bringing new life* *KRISTA* *not that you shouldn't go on dating, but, like, what will happen if you do, say like, the consequences of everything* *CHLOE* *Like, even after marriage, you should, erm, wait until you actually want a child.*	L97,P.4 L1737, P.63 L1070, P.39 L1083, P.39 L1352,P.49 L1088,P.39
Impact of Covid	Catch up approach to RSE – doing previous year's content. Absence of RSE in year 7 due to covid. Receiving RSE content mismatched to life-stage due to COVID-19 delays.	*KRISTA* *in year 8 we did the year 7 things and then, well this year we did the year 8 things.* *RUBY* *I don't remember anything in year 7.*	L330,P.12 L327,P.12

Disengaged by repetitive content	Observed division in repetitive topics . Repetition of some topics disengaging. Disengaged with repetitive content. Menstrual education as nothing new. Frustrated with repeated content. Group rejection of repeated content. Topics as normalised and mundane. Feels more learning benefit from new topics.	*KRISTA* *Periods and like sex are repetitive, but we also did masturbation and porn.* *NISHA* *some of them a bit, like, repetitive? Like, you'd hear the same stuff again?* *RUBY* *It's very repetitive, so everyone just gets really bored just hearing about it.* *CHLOE* *they just like show the same video every year, it's so annoying.*	L383,P.14 L367,P.14 L900,P.33 L911, P.33
Observing gender differences in engagement with relationships	Construction of boy's as less mature. Construction of boy's as less emotionally engaged. Construction of boy's as sexually motivated in contrast to girls. Normalisation of male sexual bragging. Observing gendered differences relationship behaviours. Construction of girls as emotionally motivated. Feels boy's have different motivations for relationships. conscious of Disparate gendered impact of relationships . Construction of RSE topics as 'for girls'. Feels boy's struggle with discomfort more. Conscious of boy's discomfort in RSE.	*NISHA* *Boys do tend to mature later than girls...* *NISHA* *I feel like the boys don't really, not don't really care, but like, I don't think it affects them as much.* *KRISTA* *I feel like boys look for the more sexual side of things.* *RUBY* *when girls get into a relationship, they'll more talk about like the personality side of it.* *NISHA* *they're probably just doing it for the experience, instead of like doing it to, like, obviously, like, be with that person,* *KRISTA* *Like everything else is like for girls.* *RUBY* *they just can't, like cope with like, a lot of information about like, what's seen as like an uncomfortable topic*	L1524, P.55 L1694,P.61 L1707,P.21 L1718,P.62 L1696,P.61 L1553,P.56 L1539,P.56

Resisting relationship pressure	Individualised construction of relationship pressure. Pressure negated by supportive home environment. Normalization of relationships amongst peers alleviates anxiety. Relationships as normalised part of social world	*NISHA* *I don't think there's pressure. I feel like it depends on what you think. So let's say you've been educated well at home..* *NISHA* *people just think it's normal to get into relationships with someone* *RUBY* **It's just a thing that just happens.**	L1304,P.47 L1667,P.60 L1673,P.60
Fear of Sexual Consequence	Want to mitigate sexual consequence. Sex as risky/dangerous. STIs as prevalent risk. Fear of sexual consequence. Risk as deterrent Construction of relationships as risky. Fear of Unplanned pregnancy. Teen parenthood as undesired outcome Unplanned preg as prevalent risk from sex. Social consequences of relationship breakdowns as deterrent. Sex as dangerous. Risk mitigation focus. School useful in aiding risk mitigation.	*KRISTA* *the main priority should be like being safe and like knowing like the consequences of your actions* *RUBY* *How to stay safe, contraception.* *NISHA* *what could possibly happen, how it could affect your life if you don't do some stuff.* *NISHA* *like it's okay to like someone but then going into a relationship could be risky.* *KRISTA* *although like pregnancy is, like, lovely having a child but when you're young, you're basically a child raising a child so it's like, it's not ideal* *KRISTA* *seeing like what happened to other people? It wasn't always bad. It was just like, they couldn't even talk to each other?*	L663,P.24 L959,P.35 L674,P.25 L1268,P.46 L1363,P.49 L1682,P.61

Fear of being undesirable	Fear of being physically undesirable. Pressure around body image and self-esteem. Anxiety of being undesirable.	*KRISTA* *I feel like lots of people have expectations, and then 'Oh, you don't meet that',* *RUBY* *Being comfortable with your body?* *KRISTA* *this sounds bad, but let's say you just don't get married because no one likes you.*	L1217,P.44 L1202, P.43 L1440,P.52
RSE as uncomfortable experience	Social context shapes responses to content Humour as deflection of nerves. Laughter as coping mechanism for discomfort. RSE topics as challenging Discomfort as indicative of progress. Discomfort tied to societal taboo. Value in uncomfortable topics. RSE lesson as incongruous experience. Social environment effects engagement in lessons.	*KRISTA* *I feel like it's your friends reactions that might make you, like, start laughing* *ADA* *I'd probably more end up like joking about something with my friends if it came up in conversation.* *KRISTA* *they just feel better to just laugh about it.* *ADA* *think it's sort of important to be a little bit uncomfortable, because it means that you're talking about things that you wouldn't usually talk about.* *NISHA* *you can find some stuff uncomfortable because you wouldn't talk about it every day. But then I feel like it is helpful* *NISHA* *being like all together with your friends and stuff, you're obviously obviously going to joke about it*	L1590,P.57 L.1165, P.42 L.1541, P.56 L1577,P.57 L1561, P.56 L1529, P.55

Rejecting idealisation of relationships	gap between idealised image of relationships and reality. Critical of societal idealisation of relationships. Want for content on living fulfilling single life. Desire to not depend on romantic relationships. Frustration with gendered idealisation of relationships. Rejection of weighting on romantic relationships. Relationships as aspirational desire for younger self. Frustration with idealisation of first sexual experiences in media.	*KRISTA* *the image of it because like, in the media having a relationship and this, that and the other is like, seen to be such a nice thing* *NISHA* *it is put out there that being in a relationship is, like, really good and stuff, but you never know* *CHLOE* *there should be more stuff teaching about like, how it's important to have, like, be happy without someone else.* *RUBY* *It should be the best thing that ever happened to you.* *ADA* *it's not actually that important to worry so much about, like, for example, like losing your virginity and getting in relationships* *RUBY* *they think of like your first time being like really, like, amazing, but that's just not how it is in real life*	L1211,P.44 L1234,P.45 L1638,P.59 L1612,P.58 L1653,P60. L1226,P.44

Distancing from sexual behaviour and desire	Abstinence as morally superior. Distancing self from sexual be haviour. Distancing from sexual behaviour Distancing self from sexual behaviour. Distancing from sexual implication. Construction of peers as risk taking. Distancing self from risky behaviour. Distancing self from sexual behaviour. Distancing self from sex. Distancing from own experience	*RUBY* *I've heard stories of like, people that were like, really good, they were willing to wait till marriage* *NISHA* *it's very easy to get pregnant anyway, if you're doing like sexual activities* *KRISTA* But like lots of people just wouldn't do that. *RUBY* *No [laughs] like relationships, right. Like just talking.* *NISHA* *I feel like people when they're listening to it, they obviously like know the consequences but don't take it seriously.* *KRISTA* *I feel like it doesn't matter what you tell people to do, I think some people are just gonna go ahead and do it*	L1458,P.53 L1378,P.60 L459,P.17 L1620,P.58 L671,P.25 L660,P.24

Appendix M – Stage Three Analysis (Teachers)

Staff Interview Findings Stage 3

Teacher 1

Superordinate Theme	Emergent Themes	Transcript Quotations	Line
Dissatisfaction with Current Approach	Feels that pupils want more focus on sex and online behaviours – but this isn't being met Sense that content isn't meeting pupil experiences. Feels current delivery isn't sufficient. Desire to expand provision to 6th form. Feels pupils are more interested in learning about sexual diversity.	*'I think they want more'* *'I just want to make it a little bit more [pause] fluid.'* *'because I don't feel like they've done it well enough throughout key stage 4'*	L424 p.15 L648 p.22 L656 p.22
Sense of failing LGBTQ+ and contraceptive needs due to ideological tension	Aware of ideological tension of contraception Anxiety around gap in contraception content. Fear of not doing LGBTQ content justice. Conscious of gap in LGBTQ+ content. Personal tension with lack of space for LGBTQ relationships in Catholic values. Personal tension with Catholic views on contraception. Acknowledgment that gender non-conforming pupils face discrimination in school.	*'we teach the Catholic point of view, but then we should teach them all the different types of contraception'* *'my only worry is good stuff like contraception. But yeah, we do still signpost?'* *'they want more education on things like like homosexual relationships.'* *'obviously, you can't, you know, have a gay marriage in the Catholic Church. And so that can be a difficult line'* *'we've got lots of students expressing themselves in different ways, but they face, they do face a lot of stigma in school.'*	L463 p.16 L515 p.18 L581 p.20 L578 p.20 L422 p.15
Need for work to be adaptive	Adapted curriculum based on pupil needs. Differences in topic priorities amongst pupils Feels school needs to reflect and respond to current needs of pupils. Working to match curriculum to current events. Impossibility of creating 'one size fits all' content. Views pupil opinions as unfixed.	*'The first year, so 2020, it was really, um, [pause] mental health.'* *'It depends what group, some want more things on like, um, sex itself'* *'the reality is, is every single one of those students will engage with it differently'*	L215 p.8 L432 p. 15 L121 p.5

Superordinate Theme	Emergent Themes	Transcript Quotations	Line
Socio-economic factors of pupil effecting ability to engage with them.	Academic performance tied to sexual values. Feels socio-economic background of pupils changes experience of delivering RSE to them. Feels non-catchment approach of Catholic schools enhances diversity in pupil body. Feels life experience of pupils effects engagement with RSE.	*'I've got a triple science top set that I teach …And they're, um, I would say, they're a lot more conservative.'* *'So sometimes they can be from quite [pause] socially different backgrounds'.* *people coming in from like, outside areas, and, um, they'd had a lot more experience in terms of like sex and drugs, and not overly sharing personal things, but they were a lot more aware of things like, um, [pause] sex and the pressures around sex. Okay, whereas I think that most of the group I've got this year haven't.*	L93 p.4 L87 p.3 L103, p.4
Stress tied to implementation of statutory guidance	Policy causing personal stress. Statutory RSE unrealistic after previous treatment of subject in schools. Planning more challenging due to need for up to date content. Increase workload. Dissatisfaction with current planning approach. Facing barriers to training access. Difficulty of finding training that fits needs of whole school RSE provision. Gap between policy and reality of delivery across school. Frustrated with gov expectations of schools. Desire for increased gov support.	*work* *'I find difficult because of all the changes that there are'* *'we are now pushing this year for more training and opportunities. But again, it's it's quite difficult'* *'but the reality is staff knowing exactly how to use it'* *'And it just hasn't got the emphasis in schools. And I think that's where it needs greater support from, from the government'*	L673 p.23 L674 p.23 L46 p.2 L170 p.6 L319 p.11 L675 p.23

Superordinate Theme	Emergent Themes	Transcript Quotations	Line
Situating self as transforming RSE	Enjoys delivery of RSE. Proud of central role in PSHE development in school. Tension between pressure of responsibility and pride Move from 'citizenship' to 'PSHE'. Undertook curriculum overhaul. Took on responsibility of PSHE as a newly qualified teacher. Dissatisfaction with previous delivery.	*teaching it I really enjoy it* *I then changed the curriculum. So we rebranded it at the end of that year* *'I picked up here what was citizenship then.. Just like one period a week, but that was very much like alcohol and drugs'* *end of my in NQT year, I picked up citizenship as a TLR and took over responsibility for it*	L46 p.2 L29 p.2 L23 p.1 L25 p.1
Feeling the strain of supporting other staff members	Torn identities between first and second subject. Feels responsible for whole school practice. Other staff defaulting to her to problem solve. Feeling strain of supporting other staff navigating challenges of RSE. Lacking time and capacity to support all other staff. Difficult in preparing staff for breadth of RSE topics throughout school years. Sense of personal responsibility for subject.	*'I have it but i'm a history and politics teacher like'* *'so it's getting the training to the staff then trickling it down through the lessons.'* *'what I find is, staff grabbed me, they're like, I'm having a problem, this is going on. And I'm like, I'm not aware. Like, yeah, I need that in an email'* *'that's what I find difficult cuz I've got about 23 staff at the moment'.*	L130 p.5 L617 p. 21 L185 p. 7 L189 p.7

Superordinate Theme	Emergent Themes	Transcript Quotations	Line
Lack of Confidence in other staff members' ability	Aware that her positive experience might not be shared by others. Discomfort of handing it over to others Lack of confidence in other staff. Exasperated with other staff struggle to understand gender. Low expectations of other staff's ability in classroom management of RSE. Feels other staff are less comfortable delivering RSE than her. Want for other staff to be knowledgeable. Lacks confidence in other staff ability to manage sexual harassment in the classroom. Anxiety around other staff's ability to implement sexual harassment policy.	*'I think for me, personally, to teach it, I find it really good'* *' what I find even harder is that the teacher is delivering it'* *'as a staff as a whole, we don't know'* *'oh god, yeah…they find it challenging as well having students are [pause] transitioning, and I think again, that's the lack of education.'* *'So the consistency in terms of delivery… is difficult and what you feel comfortable, like, I'm very comfortable, um'* *'that's fine when it's brought to me and then then I can go on, I'm happy to address it. But it has, it's got to be whole school*	L386 p.13 L128 p.5 L617 p. 21 L628 p.21 L139 p.5 L342 p.12
Feeling heard by pupils	Pupils generally responsive to RSE delivery. Positive view of pupil engagement in open conversations about complex topics. Felt pupils were receptive to direct communication about sexual harassment.	*'they're amazing. And they're really responsive? And they're like, yes, actually, you are right, I understand where you're coming from there.'* *'They're really good. Yeah, really responsive'*	L334 p.12 L377 p.13

Superordinate Theme	Emergent Themes	Transcript Quotations	Line
Unprepared in navigating current sexuality and gender landscape	Feeling ill-equipped. Desire to be knowledgeable on pupil sexual cultures. Feeling unprepared. Lacking confidence in own knowledge of sexuality. Lacking insight into social media. Feels out of touch with pupil knowledge of gender identity. Feels out of touch with YP's sexual/gender worlds. Not being able to keep up with current discourse. Need to be informed on YP's sexual worlds. Curious at girl's interest in female body.	*'I find that hard, because I don't know, I always want to make sure I'm, I do my research. But actually, sometimes, that research isn't the most up to date'* *'like I do training and stuff, but I still don't know enough to do that [pause] to do a good job of that, to be honest.'* *'obviously, because it's changing so much, um, that's difficult'* *'Apparently, there's a tik tok trend at the moment that's drawing naked women. Had no clue'*	L608 p.21 L596 p. 20 L614 p.21 L52 p.2
Time Deprivation	RSE dispersed through curriculum time. Lack of dedicated time for RSE. Sex content delivered from year 10. Time over preference dictating who delivers RSE. LGBTQ content constrained by time. Expectation to do more in less time Sense of not doing subject justice.	*'I've also implemented PSHE, within, um, form time'* *'if I've got space on my timetable, I have it'* *'it's essentially at the moment, anyone who has space, okay, which is hard'* *'it's not even so much that we can't do, It's more time at the moment'*	L37 p.2 L129 p.5 L137 p.5 L588 p.20

Superordinate Theme	Emergent Themes	Transcript Quotations	Line
Witness to deterioration of pupil relationships post-covid.	Concern for pupil mental health post covid. Observing distinct impact on new Year 7s post covid. Observing developmental delays in pupils after COVID. Shock at relationship breakdowns between pupils post-covid. Concern for pupil lives moving online during covid. Feels girls specifically have experienced friendship breakdowns after covid. Disgust at pupil's new behaviour towards each other. Perceived difference in impact of covid on girls and boys. Pupil behaviour towards each other in need of management.	*'it felt like a little bit Lord of the Flies, because the kids were always against each other, they were so competitive'* *'it's probably potentially delayed it for quite a lot of them'* *'the way that they spoke to each other was disgusting. There was a big breakdown.'* *'It was relationships, friendships. Real massive problem.'* *'the issues there with girls and where they speak to each other'* *'I don't want to say, but a bit savage.'*	L210 p.8 L200 p.7 L212 p. 8 L222 p.8 L229 p.8 L240 p.9
Constrained by wider cultures of misogyny	Distancing self from school culture. School culture as misogynistic. Culture of misogyny in pupil families Maturity offers better insight into inequalities. Tension between school approach and homelife of pupils. Feels there is pupil hostility to anti-sexism initiatives. Concern about pupils and consent. Disappointed in lack of pupil engagement in tackling sexual harassment.	*'Like, I didn't go to school here. Lots of teachers did go to school here, but I didn't come to school here.'* *'it is a bit of a cultural thing with a lot of the intake of students'* *when you're hearing it at home, it's hard for us then in school to break that down* *that's a maturity thing. As you get older, you're not going to start to see it until much later.* *'I don't want to say that laddy, but like, yeah, it wasn't, It wasn't okay.'* *I still think there's a lot of hostility towards it. '*	L274 p.10 L276 p.10 L362 p.13 L367 p.13 L280 p.10 L357 p.12

Superordinate Theme	Emergent Themes	Transcript Quotations	Line
Responsivity to pupil voice	Ofsted report as prompting action in school. Sarah Everard cases as catalyst for change. Called into action by Sixth Former demands. Taking lead from YP. Places importance on pupil voice as tool for shaping provision. Pupil pressure to increase content on gender expression.	*'we've sort of read that and are putting a plan into place'* *'It all really blew up, I would say, with the Sarah Everard thing'* *'that's when we realised'* *' trying to do lots of student voice as well'* *'the sixth form, it just exploded.'* *' I tried to work with the pupils a lot of the time I get them to say, what works for them'* *'Lots of the students want us to do a bit more on expression, gender'*	L269 p.10 L282 p.10 L290 p.10 L397 p14 L283 p.10 L612 p.21 L413 p.14
Barriers to changing school culture	Lack of agreed upon understanding of sexual harassment and appropriate response. Gap between personal understanding of sexual harassment and other staff + pupil understanding. Aware of gaps in current consent content. Conscious of presenting school in a poor light.	*'Getting the students and the staff to understand that and respond to that in that way. It's difficult.'* *'And I was like, we need to discuss what that means. What does saying that mean?'* *'think in terms of consent, there's still, we still have problems with that.'* *'I don't want to say [pause]'*	L329 p.12 L332 p.12 L656 p22 L271 p.10
Catholic lens as route to good practice	Clear catholic value framework eases challenges of delivering RSE. Uses religious teachings as springboard for healthy relationship content. Views Catholicism as reflective of loving relationships. Emphasises Relationships focus as necessary foundation to sex ed. Role of school in modelling healthy relationships.	*'but it's actually easier because there's so much in the Bible and stuff like that about respect and the way we treat each other'* *'the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit all have a deeply loving relationship. And that's where we start is relationships'* *'we don't do sex until we've talked about relationships.'*	L488 p.17 L503 p.17 L506 p.17

Superordinate Theme	Emergent Themes	Transcript Quotations	Line
Catholic sexual values as unattainable	Conscious of external perception of Catholicism and sex education as mutuality exclusive. Catholic sexual values as aspirational but unrealistic. Perceives Cath. Sexual values as in tension with modern relationship practices. Having to balance contraception content with Catholic teachings. Comparison to secular school delivery. Conscious of need to prepare pupils for 'reality' of sex outside of marriage. Acceptance of sidestepping Catholic teachings in modern society.	*'I think people see it and they think, God, you can't teach sex education in a Catholic school'* *'but also, being very aware that it still happens outside of marriage, and that's why we need to behave safely.'* *'But it is difficult because I know a lot of schools do a lot more stuff in terms of like, contraception'* *'I recognise today it's a, you know, and for some people as well [pause], it's 'actually, I'm gonna step back on that'.'*	L486 p.17 L481 p.17 L513 p.18 L574 p.20
Gospel values as aspirational	Uses wide range of Catholic sources to tie lessons to gospel values. Gospel as aspirational moral guidance for staff and pupils. Visibility of Catholic pupil ideals in school. Catholic moral and character values underpin lesson design. Learning objectives rooted in Catholic values.	*'we might look at a Bible reference on respect. You might look at what the Pope says about LGBTQ'* *'It's a set of gospel values that we all try to live our lives by.'* *'Every single learning objective is linked to one of those words'*	L459 p.16 L452 p.16 L454 p,16
Varied pupil reception of Catholic teaching	Compartmentalising Catholic view as distinct from pupil view. Mixed pupil reception to Catholic values. Feels pupil anxiety around moral identity implications of non-adherence. Pupil distant acceptance of Catholic values. Feels pupil rejection of content on contraception and waiting until marriage.	*'just almost sort of accept that that's the Catholic view point, but you're not [pause]* *'their biggest question is always so are you not a Christian? Are you a bad Catholic? Right? if you've had sex before marriage?'* *.'But others are, um, almost just dismissive, in terms of waiting until marriage, but that's their own opinion'*	L550 p.19 L557 p.19 L534 p.18

Superordinate Theme	Emergent Themes	Transcript Quotations	Line
Proactive response to sexual harassment in school	Introduced 'yellow card' penalty system for sexual harassment. Real want to be seen as proactive against sexism. Want to be proactive around sexual harassment. Tackling sexual harassment in school as ongoing process. Perceives RSE as key tool to tackling VAWG. Part of collective staff response to sexism.	*'it's like a penalty. So now one of the penalties is sexual harassment'* *'that's when we realised as group, as a collective staff that it had to be done'* *'I think it will take a couple of years. But I think actually we've we've responded really well to where we are'* *, 'like if we want to eliminate things like Sarah Everard, it's better education. Yeah, we need to make sure we've got that.'*	L310 p.11 L290 p.10 L344 p.12 L678 p.23
Relationship to pupils effects practice	Close relationship to form group. Feeling of the room changes depending on pupil group. Relationship with pupils key to effective RSE. Experience of teaching RSE dependent on pupil group. Pre-existing relationship with class bolsters engagement and makes teaching easier.	*'I've got a year ten form, which I've taken through from year seven'* *'I find it very much varies depending on what group I've got, and the students in that room'* *'some people that haven't got that relationship with the student'* *'I think I find it easy when I've got a relationship already with that class. Yeah, it's amazing.'*	L32 p.2 L75 p.3 L149 p.6 L378 p.13
Importance of Boundaries	Feels anonymity can bolster pupil engagement. Importance of boundaries in RSE teaching. Identifies specific teaching style required for RSE. Risk mitigation for pupils.	*'challenging conversations that aren't appropriate'* *'giving them opportunities as well, even if they want to do it anonymously'* *'because it's never shutting down conversations...'* *'keeping yourself safe, that sort of thing'*	L160 p.6 L389 p.14 L153 p.6 L660 p.23

Teacher 2

Superordinate Theme	Emergent Themes	Transcript Quotation	Line Number
Questioning own belonging in faith	Questioning own belonging in faith. Feeling alienated from church as divorced Catholic woman. Resource narrative confronts own relationship choices. Feeling ostracised from resource narrative due to divorce.	*'you start like questioning your Religion. So, like, you know, your your beliefs.'* *'like I say, I'm divorced.'* *'I've been to, like mass sometimes and they do the parable of the adulterous, the story of the adulterous woman and stuff, and I've been really uncomfortable'*	L64, P.3 L67,P.3 L360,P.13
Forging own religious identity	Want to present non-dogmatic approach to Catholic teachings. Positions self as LGBTQ+ ally. Chose to move from secular to Catholic education. Positive view of inclusion of gospel values. Construction of liberal Catholicism. Aligns self with liberal Catholicism.	*'I try and get get through to students that, you know, yes, the Catholic Church teaches this, however, yeah, we are all free'* *'then after that, I started in Catholic education, after my NQT year'* *''there's some positives to the, to the resources, erm, like getting in the Gospel values'* *'Not all of us, in Catholicism, you know, are strict with sex before marriage'* *'with having the focus 3 the gospel values on living life to the full. That, I like that message'*	L69.P3 L619, P.21 L54,P.2 L718,P.24 L812, p.28
Frustration with education policy landscape	Ridiculing homophobic rhetoric. Exclusionary policy as safeguarding risk. conscious of hostile political environment surrounding inclusive RSE. Concern for homophobic policy discourse. Policy makers out of touch with reality of experience. Need to share workload due to capacity.	*'does that mean that I go, if the come out as straight to me, I go ring home. 'Do you know your child straight?' [laughs].'* *'it's difficult because then you've still got, you have a protests, like in the Midlands, for teaching different genders and stuff'* *So yeah, I don't, I don't think they do really*	L782,P.27 L793,P.27 L797,P.27

	Frustration with increasingly conservative education policy agenda.	*understand at the moment?* *'i'm just taking some of that on because he's got that much work on.'*	L698,P.24
Feeling constrained by diocese	Diocese as inevitably out of touch. Feeling constrained by diocesan approach. Diocese want for consistency across schools.	*'whether we do as a school, I don't know, because like I said, the diocese are quite keen on not being inconsistent.'* *'with having the focus on being the gospel values on living life to the full. That, I like that message but then again, it's going on to it being very one dimensional.'* *'like the diocese wanted us to be consistent.'*	L829,P.28 L812,P.28 L88,P3
Structural change post-stat RSE	Some statutory content delineated to form time. RSE content dispersed through lessons and form time. Change in RSE format since policy change. School recent adopters of Ten:Ten resources. Notes RE as principle setting for RSE in catholic contexts.	*'So it is covered in form times as well.'* *'some of the things that we're doing in the form, form time curriculum'* *'I think it was mainly delivered through form time. Erm [pause] before it was like made, made into policy.'* *'so the first year was when I, when I came here was during the first lockdown.'* *'it was like within the RE department, and I guess it's always sat within RE departments isn't it?'*	L317,P.11 L283,P10 L41,P2 L31,P2 L622,P.21

Distancing from conservative Catholicism	Distancing approach from conservative Catholicism portrayed in resources. Personal tension with presentation of conservative catholic values. Gap between core gospel values and sexual ethics. Tension in negotiating Catholic values that diverge from own values. Gap between resource Catholicism and own Catholicism. Tension between gospel values and Catholic sexual ethics. Frustrated with singular presentation of catholic values in resources.	*'and we're all like, look, you know, you can be Catholic and you can still have different opinions'* *'there are some things on that I, I don't prescribe.'* *'it's really based around [pause], you know, the value of loving one another, the way that we go with it and to put our own stamp on it.'* *'You know, the Catholic Church's teachings that I don't necessarily agree with?'* *'you could look at them and think, 'Well, I'm Catholic, and I disagree with that., and then does that make me a bad Catholic?'*	L715,P.24 L65,P.3 L724,P.25 L352,P.12 L61,P3
Unified staff identity.	Collective department identity. Cohesive department identity. Collective school/staff identity. Cohesive department religious identity. Unified staff identity.	*'we're all really good at doing like CPD. Yeah. And do a lot of our own research and things'* *'that's one of our things at [school name]'* *'all of us in the RE department are Catholic'* *'we're, we're not going to say 'you can't use contraception', we'll say to hear the different views.'*	L655,P.22 L587,P.20 L713,P.24 L719,P.25

Feeling supported by colleagues	Highly supportive department. Confidence tied to supportive environment. Facing tricky content collectively. Humorous moments shared with colleagues. Feeling held and holding colleagues. Confidence bolstered by strong departmental team. Division between confidence in team practice vs confidence in content. Confident in department's commitment to developing practice.	*'we usually do help one another, yeah. We're all such a close department'* *'So with like the questions we get in the question box, [colleague name] had one and she was like 'what's No Nut November?' [Laughs]'* *'this is why we've got a really strong team in the department, 'cuz we are, we're all really confident'* *'as a team were good, we're strong. We'll see about the curriculum.'*	L678,P.23 L670,P.23 L272,P.10 L836,P.28
Teaching hindered by resources	Gap between resource design and experience of teaching. Negative perception of resources used. Resources less appealing to older years. Comedy content makes task of delivering lesson harder. Perceives resources as trying too hard. Pupil rejection of cringey resources. trying to reconcile approach used in video resources. Rejection of restrictive resources.	*'it's really difficult to do their cheesy one liners, to run that face to face'* *'n* *the older years doing like these resources, generally find them too much* *'one scene where she's eating a strawberry and it's like the M&S music and the kids are like 'what is going on?'* *'They say it's really cringey'* *'they're trying to obviously, they're coming at it from an angle of trying to get kids to engage'*	L122,P.5 L59,P.3 L224,P.8 L126,P.5 L119,P.5 L120,P.5

Need for boundaries	Anonymity as tool for pupil comfort. Ground rules as self-protective measure. Question box as tool for maintaining teacher boundaries. Desire for calm, managed classroom environment. Need for mutual conduct agreement with pupils. Boundaries in classroom as key to teaching confidence. Conduct agreement as catalyst for successful RSE. Feels direct engagement with pupils inappropriate due to personal nature of RSE.	*'So…the students who don't feel comfortable asking questions about that do have genuine answers.'* *'so you know, never ask me a personal question-'* *'So we can like filter some of the questions a little bit better as well'* *'make it really clear to Students, these things we're talking about, these are things we're not talking about'* *'we do try and you know, start off of the, let's get the silliness out of the way now and then, right, these are the biological terms we're gonna use'* *'So again, the ground rules, and then you know, we're exploring different topics, we want you to feel comfortable but we also want you to challenge yourself'* *'with it been a personal thing, you don't want to pick on them?'*	L154,P.6 L343,P.12 L147,P.5 L341,P.12 L174,P.6 L488,P.17 L387,P.13
Motivated by need to prepare pupils for life	CYP as informed decisions makers. Construction of RSE as preparatory for future adult life. Founding ethos of school informs preparatory RSE approach. RSE as preparatory for risk mitigation.	*'and so this is what's available to you, you need to make your own decision.'* *'what if you're in a homosexual relationship when you're older and you have kids…who's going to have that period chat?''* *'you know 'teaching what they need for life'. Which is, you know, the approach that we're going for'* *'if you're going to enter into this, then you need to be aware of all of the consequences. '*	L722,P.25 L514,P.18 L589,P.20 L578,P.20

Evolving treatment of unplanned pregnancy	Shift of teen preg from sex ed failure to safeguarding concern.	*'unless there's like safeguarding stuff I'm not aware about, we're not overly thinking about it'*	L573,P.20
Impact of covid on experience of teaching	Started current role in lockdown. Own training effected by covid. Different 'feel' of pupil groups post-covid.	*'when I came here was during the first lockdown.'* *'It was all online.'* *'like you see some of our year sevens that have come in this year, and they are still, like, primary.'*	L31,P.2 L636,P.22 L425,P.15
Distancing from responsibility	Distancing self from resource decision. Defers to head of department as authority on RSE decisions made. Lack of confidence in own knowledge of policy level decisions. Head of Department = head of school ethos. Distance from overarching content decisions. Downplaying own role in decisions.	*'I'm not sure what [Dept. Head Name] would've looked at'* *'[Dept. Head Name] will be able to answer this one a bit better'* *'I'm not sure again, that would be a question for [head of dept name]'* *'he's is, like, the Head of Ethos. I'm just quite new to some it'*	L84,P.3 L39, P.2 L96,P.4 L697, P.24
Responsivity to pupil voice	Provision of opt out choice for pupils for potentially triggering topics. Pupil views as spring-board. Responsive to pupil voice despite personal qualms. Outside presence as soliciting more honest pupil perspectives.	*'we have given them a choice to step outside, erm, and then also people that they can speak to if they need to'* *'it's goes back to what the girls were saying'* *'we did, we've done some trigger warnings'*	L493,P.17 L760,P.26 L478,P.16

Perceives RSE as catalyst for inappropriate behaviour	Construction of inappropriate behaviour in RSE classroom. Want to reduce perceived inappropriate behaviour. Resistance to perceived inappropriate pupil questions. Laughter response disruptive to teaching. Boy's inappropriate questions as inevitability. Talking to YP about sex as difficult task.	*'also, it prevents over the top behaviours.'* *"'they do try and go off the, you know, how babies are made into, you know, to ask other questions and stuff'* *'if it's the whole class erupting in giggles, we have a bit of a giggle, we calm ourselves down, and then when we start'* *'you will get the obvious, always from the boys, 'Are we doing practicals?'* *'I guess it's really difficult'*	L167,P.6 L144,P.5 L180,P.7 L199,P.7 L120,P.5
Pupil Engagement contingent on topic.	Engagement contingent on topic. Feels pupils more engaged with content on sex.	*'I do think that might have been the topic of like, sexual harassment?'* *'Definitely the sex bit'*	L241,P.9 L138,P.5
Moral anxiety	Worried about moral implications of teaching stringent sexual ethics to pupils. Questioning construction of sin in RSE content.	*'so what message is that given out to our students who have, you know, experimented, exploring themselves. Does that mean, we're telling them they've committed a sin?'*	L851,P.29
Tension between aims and pupil perspectives	Diverging view to pupils on gender specific topics. Tension between intended aims and pupil reception of content. Adjusting to gender identity language.	*'I know some of the girls were saying it's periods and stuff like that and it doesn't relate to boys, but then..'* *'some of them were like 'I can't be in that lesson because it's triggering', like, but if we don't talk about these things then how [pause] how are we ever going to?'* *'And, like, you know, gender neutral or transgender students, where would they fit in?'*	L510,P.18 L467,P.16 L559,P.19

Rejection of gender segregation	Gender segregated RSE content as incompatible with inclusive approach. Rejection of specific priorities for different genders. Views menstrual education as universally necessary regardless of gender. Contraception as mutual responsibility. Rejection of gender segregation in RSE. Menstrual education necessary for all.	*'it's never going to help…it's just going to isolate them'* *'I think, should that not be a conversation for all, because contraception is not just down to the woman?* *'if we are separating them, to talk about different things, then how's that ever going to, like, it's gonna make it more of a taboo'*	L558,P.19 L575,P.20 L549,P.19
Confidence rooted in experience	Confidence in RSE delivery developed through experience. Quality of delivery contingent on confidence. Experienced teaching PSHE since start of career. Feels she benefitted from teaching RSE from onset of teaching career. Gradually taking on more responsibility in curriculum design.	*'obviously, I've been teaching for quite a while so I'm more confident doing so'* *'we're all really confident, you know, to be able to do that. So I think we probably are the best ones to deliver.'*	L271,P.10 L274,P.10
Observing gendered differences	Gender differences in engagement with SH content. Feels girl's engage in quieter but more serious way. More vocal engagement from boys in lesson. Perceives girl's engagement as more serious. Narrative of boy's maturing slower than girls. Experiences gendered difference in classroom engagement. Conscious of boy's feeling targeted.	*'obviously some of the girls, quite rightly, were outraged. Erm, but then obviously, I think for some of the boys like, we did have to flip it.'* *'Most girls do take it a lot more serious.'* 'boys tend to ask more questions.' *'girls are the ones who do put, you know, some genuine, serious questions in the question box.'* *'the boys, it takes them a little while to catch up.'* *'some of the boys felt a little bit attacked at times. So that's why it's important that we did flip it.'*	L252,P.9 L206,P.7 L192,P.7 L215,P.8 L229,P.8 L256,P.9

Understands RE department as RSE specialists	Constructs RE department as proxy for specialist RSE. Distancing own approach from 'non specialist' form tutors. Lack of confidence in form tutor ability to delivery LGBTQ+ content. Anxiety of passing content on to less confident/untrained form tutors. Constructs department as preferred pastoral support for pupils.	*'I think we probably are the best ones to deliver.'* *'I think some form tutors do struggle, with some of that stuff. You know, the Pride resources as well'* *'we're are confident delivering all of that, but obviously, we're not doing everything'* *'we're the team like a lot of students go to for support and things, like a lot of students come out to us.'*	L275,P.10 L284,P.10 L322, P.11 L834,P.28
Mistrust of pupil ability to find information	School as preferable information source. Mistrust of pupil's online information sources.	*'like the girls are saying a lot of them will just go to Google, but obviously we want them to get confident to speak to people, rather than just what they find from Google'*	L157,P.6
Training as catalyst for confidence.	Training as catalyst for confidence. Received specific resource training in current school. Elective interest in RSE during training.	*'Because we're all trained, we've done all the training'* *making it more inclusive, but also training staff up to have the confidence to deliver that.* *'when I came here, did the Ten:Ten training and things.'* *'I sort of, like, took over that. It was part of my NQT project'*	L324,P.11 L320,P.11 L629,P.22 L616,P.21
RSE as site of social change	Want for school to be seen as progressive RSE as tool for social change. Construction of discomfort as necessary for social change.	*'that is pride stuff at the moment. There's resources for the different year groups and stuff'* *'how's that ever going to, like, it's gonna make it more of a taboo, and how is that going to help with, with [period] poverty?'* *'if we don't talk about these things then how [pause] how are we ever going to?'*	L309,P.11 L550,P.19 L468,P.16

Conscious of gaps in inclusivity	Conscious of gaps in current delivery of stat. content. Feels provision could be more inclusive. Lack of inclusivity of female experience in masturbation content in resources. Pride month form content as representative of LGBTQ+ content.	*'but it is all stuff that we could be doing better, so we're having a look.'* *'some of it is making it more inclusive'* *'it doesn't specifically address female masturbation'* *'that is pride stuff at the moment'*	L318,P.11 L320, P.11 L865, P.29 L309, P.11
Informed by lived experience of relationships	Drawing on lived experience with male partner to inform views on menstrual ed for boys. Frustration with partner's rejection of 'women's' topics.	*'I'm like '[name] one day that is going to happen to me, yeah, I'm gonna want to talk to you'. He's like 'no, it's Woman Stuff''*	L533,P.18
Resistance to pupil boundaries	Resistance to pupil requests for trigger warnings. Frustration with pupil boundaries around triggering content. Perception of YP as overly sensitive. Rhetoric of young people 'cancelling' difficult topics. Pupil rejection of topics due to perceived threat to wellbeing.	*'a lot of them moaning and asking for trigger warnings'* *you can't talk about anything without them being triggered.* *'A few students were not happy about that because they said that for those with eating disorders, it's too triggering.'* *some of them were like 'I can't be in that lesson because it's triggering', like, but if we don't talk about these things then how [pause*	L447,P.15 L448,P.15 L458,P.16 L467,P.16
Distancing from secular practice	Condom demonstration as emblem of secular RSE. Approach to RSE variable, dependent on school.	*'I did the condom demonstration and things like that'*	L617,P.21

Need to fill gaps in resources	Lack of nuance in all resources – not just faith. Applied adaptive approach to fill gaps in resource content. Frustration with lack of gender nuance in BBC resource. Conversation squares as means to add nuance to lesson content. Need to tailor Catholic resources to meet pupil diversity. One resource not sufficient – blend required to meet need. Drawing on secular and faith resources. Video content alone leaves gaps. Provision of sign posts to secular sexual health orgs. Religious diversity of pupils.	*'a lot of the resources, whether they're religious or not, they're very one dimensional.'* *'for some of the boys like, we did have to flip it. And we did talk about, well actually, you know, how can you all keep yourself safe?'* *'quite one sided.'* *'the conversation squares, fill any gaps that are in the video'* *'Some [resources] are a bit too Catholic, which is why we want to put our, own spin.'* *'dip in and out of different things'*	L815,P.28 L253,P.9 L250,P.9 L873,P.30 L745,P.25 L657,P.22
Witnessing social and academic delay in pupils	Perceived developmental delays in younger years. Pupil's social development hindered by covid. Concern for covid impact on pupils. Construction of sensitivity as result of COVID social delay. Tangible impact on pupil development through older years. Increased enactment of hostility between pupils. Feels online learning has deteriorated pupil capacity for engagement. Adapting pupil engagement methods for post-covid learning style. Observed rise in passive learning since COVID.	*'they are still, like, primary.'* *'some of the students are like, 'Oh, I just do this' and, you know, yeah, 'if somebody did this, I'd just hit him'* *'I think with COVID, some of them have lost that'* *'they don't really have those skills still, 'cuz their last year in school would've been year nine.'* *'passive learners, you can't blame 'em, they've had like two years of online learning.'* *we've got a culture of passive learners these days. They would rather just listen, move on to the next one, or they'd rather just sit there take a little bit in and move on to the next'*	L416, P.15 L408,P.14 L410,P.14 L435,P.15 L396,P.14 L379. P.13

Teacher 3

Superordinate Theme	Emergent Themes	Transcript Quotation	Line Number
Personal history with school	Whole teaching career within this school. Worked way up to head of dept. Attended same school as pupil. Personal history with school. Recently took on role.	*'I started off in the RE department as a trainee and then became just a teacher and then after a little while the Head of Ethos'* *'If you speak to some of our ex pupils, and like, yeah, thinking about me when I was at school'*	L9,P.1 L212,P.8
Statutory policy as catalyst for change	Policy change forced relationships content to become explicit. Recognises stat RSE catalyst moment for change. Stat RSE catalyst for change in nature of role.	*'now it's compulsory that, everyone does it , it will make a huge difference'* *'I know that when [pause] it wasn't statutory, I don't, I don't think we did enough'* *'It was just at the time of all the reforms, and it was humongous'*	L228,P.8 L203,P.7 L62,P.3
Tension with Catholic sexual ethics	Recognition of abstract difficulties navigating content in faith schools. Tension navigating LGBTQ+ content and Catholicism. Developing 'workarounds' for points of contention. Diverging views on resource sexual ethics in dept.	*'they feel like going against the Church teaching or they feel like they'll get backlash from parents.'* *'the way we go down the route is [pause] the dignity of all people. No matter who the person is'* *'one of the teachers was saying I actually feel like it pushes the natural family planning a lot, which I disagreed with'*	L413, P.14 L304,P.11 L117,P.5
Inspection Anxiety	Anxiety surrounding Ofsted SH inspection. Motivated by positive Ofsted feedback.	*'I hope that they spoke well about what they'd had.'* *'Ofsted, start of this year who said really nice things about the PSHE stuff and they were really positive.'*	L390,P.14 L241,P.9
Worried about daughters' safety	Driven by wants for own daughters. Worry for daughters future safety. Anxiety around VAWG.	*'when I'm thinking about that all the information we're giving out, I've almost got them in my head'*	L332,P.12 L330,P.12

		'It's worrying, like, yeah, I've got two little girls at home'	
Workload pressure	Dissatisfied with lack of dedicated timetable space. Hindered by workload/time not faith. Workload of RSE integration eased by resources.	*'feels like a, you're almost like a ticking a box, it feels like 'okay you've got 25 minutes in form time'* *'it was more time out that we didn't want to have to use.'* *'it was all done for us in terms of the Ten:Ten resources'*	L247,P.9 L209,P.8 L255,P.9
Catholic education as distinct	Conscious of difference to 'normal' education roles. Catholic education as distinct experience. Recognises difference to other educational systems. Resource decisions ultimately shaped by diocese.	*'so Head of Ethos [laughs] doesn't really have a definition. Probably doesn't have much of a job spec either'* *'It's like a shock to the system when they come here and they're told that they need to say prayers and do this and that.'* *'whenever we're making decision, it should be our, our distinctive Christian, Catholic ethos should be at the root of it.'* *'in the end is off like a diocesan approach that we've taken.'*	L25,P.1 L41,P.2 L46,P.2 L134,P.5
RSE as fulfilling	Enjoyment of RSE/PSHE work. RSE delivery as duty.	*'it was humongous, erm, and I've loved it'* *'Because I think it is your responsibility is to teach about that and teach it well'*	L63,P.3 L421,P.15
Desire to change harmful sexual culture	Confidence in DfE guidance on SH. Recognition that SH is embedded in school environment. Want for school proactivity on SH. Desire for progress. Want for school to be seen as proactive. Embedding visible messaging in school environment.	*'the DfE have been really clear about what they want'* *'we know it happens around school, we've heard it.'* *'Are the experiences of young women in our school changing?'* *'we did a lot during COVID on online safety, we tried to push that during it.'* *'So we've got, as you as you walk out, you might see a big poster* that we've had made'	L384,P.13 L352,P.12 L364,P.13 L156,P.6 L181, P.7

Desire to make difference in young women's lives	Recognising role of school in YW's long-term wellbeing. Desire to make difference in YW lives.	*'we know how important it is for for the DfE, but also just for girls that are having that education.'* *We've had all this delivery now of sexual harassment and how it shouldn't be happening. Are the experiences of young women in our school changing?*	**L394, P.14** **L362,P.13**
Confidence in school delivery	Confidence in dept team. Confidence in school implementation. Confidence in school approach to tackling SH. Confidence in school approach.	*wanted was for it to be delivered by a team of staff that I knew had got training* *we found that quite easy for us to do.* *they could speak about it, because they've had that information* *I think it's great, because it's not shying away from the fact that kids have phones*	**L94,P.4** **L408,P.14** **L393, P.14** **L165,P.6**
School values as motivation for RSE	Views school founding values as justifying PSHE. Relationships content tied to religious ethos. School values as motivation for RSE. Relationships ed more palatable than sex.	*I think that, that's where we come from, whether it's PSHE or RSE, we come from that foundation.* *the PSHE curriculum fits really nicely in with our Catholic ethos* *as a Catholic school, I feel like we've spoken about relationships and the importance of relationships* *we teach them what they need to know for life and that, to me is, I think it's the most important thing* *We say this is relationships, so everybody has to do*	**L75,P.3** **L65,P.3** **L225,P.8** **L308,P.11** **L425,P.15**

Witness to change in pupil experiences	Witnessing change in YP interactions. Concern surrounding pupil online safety. Witness to increasingly online pupil interactions during covid.	*the social side of it has changed so much, because so much of their interaction happens online.* *your relationship with people online, and how [pause] people feel anonymous, and they feel like they can say whatever they want* ***we did a lot during COVID on online safety, we tried to push that during it.***	**L173,P.6** **L187,P.7** **L156, p. 6**
School as site of religious experience	Role tied to maintenance of specific religious character of school. School as site of spiritual experience for staff and students alike.	*it's the distinct, distinctive nature of the Catholic ethos of the school, which is so important.* *everybody's having experiences when they're here, of faith*	**L31,P.2** **L39,P.2**
Strong team identity	Strong team identity. Strong school identity. Collective diocese identity. Collective department/school identity. Collaborative working as key to success.	*we could unpack that a little bit more because it was the RE department coming together* *We said well, we don't feel like we've done this justice* *we're trying as a diocese* *we can come together easier to talk about any issues that are coming up, or how things are going*	**L120,P.5** **L111,P.4** **L446,P.15** **L101,P.4**
Lack of confidence in other staff	Anxiety around passing content outside of department.	*I wanted was for it to be delivered by a team of staff that I knew had got training*	**L94,P.4**
Desire for control	Want for quality assurance. Want for control. Active choice to situate in RE. RE dept as proxy for quality assurance.	*The reason why I did that is partly because I'm a control freak* *I've made a decision to do it through the RE department* *all of the RE department have had training from the CES, the Catholic Education Service on how to deliver good RSE in a Catholic school, and how we go about things,*	**L93,P.4** **L91,P.4** **L96,P.4**

Need for tailored resources	Desire for diverse teaching methods within lesson design. Adapting approach/curriculum to pupil experiences. Applying adaptive curriculum to meet pupil need. Need for tailored approach to resources. Rejection of prohibitive approach. Frustration with generic resources. Recognition resources are not sufficient alone.	*what we like about the Ten:Ten is like that media rich element of it. So it's not that the RE teachers are talking all the time* *we did a lot during COVID on online safety, we tried to push that during* *we know what happens in our school, so we need to tweak it so that it's relevant for our students* *we tried to add more of the LGBTQ+ information into the, into the Ten:Ten resources, because it's not explicit*	**L138,P.5** **L156,P.6** **L380,P.13** **L284,P.10**
RSE as preparation for life	Young people as informed decision makers. RSE as life preparation. Education as risk mitigation.	*It's trying to get them to make good decisions* *that is the foundation for our personal development curriculum. Are we teaching people what they need to know for life?* *they will be using them [phones], what we want is for them to be educated to use them in a good and positive way*	**L181, P.7** **L71,P.3** **L166,P.6**
Distancing from conservative sexual values	Distancing from exclusionary sexual values. Emphasising more inclusive approach. Emphasising liberal school ethos. Rejection of heteronormative narratives. Aligning self as ally. Aligning self as ally.	*No matter who the person is, they are worthy of dignity and respect* *the intrinsic value of every human should be at the core of everything that we do.* *For us, as a faith school, who are maybe more liberal as a school and more open as a school* *they say it's inclusive. because they don't necessarily say 'Oh, this is about a man or a woman' or not but it's very obvious that it is about men and women* *Relationships and Sex Education, is for everybody, and not just for your heteronormative people.*	**L305,P.11** **L81,P.3** **L406,P.14** **L287,P.10** **L295,P.10**

Aware of hostile climate	Risk of community backlash.	*primary schools who said 'we don't feel like we can do this at the minute because of the people we've got in our community'.*	**L452,P.16**
Ambition to improve delivery	Goal setting of subject in own right . Not yet satisfied with current delivery. RSE/PSHE as iterative project. Recognition of flaws in current approach. Feels prior delivery not sufficient. Aiming for best practice. Desire for specific staff training. Delivery hindered by covid.	*We want to make it a bit more [pause] academic and feel like there is a subject there that students are actually learning from* *We're not where we want to be at the end of the day.* *it's still ongoing.* *at the minute it's not quite there* *I don't think we did enough as a school beforehand.* *and last year was the first time we could actually do it in person*	**L248,P.9** **L240,P.9** **L239,P.9** **L340,P.12** **L204,P.7** **L105,P.4**
Frustration with gaps in policy	Space for inconsistency in policy. Desire for more robust policy requirements. Frustration with lack of structural support. Pressure of implementing statutory policy.	*it makes it easier for people to shirk their responsibilities.* *if it was more of a statutory, you must teach about this, then I think they would find that a lot easier,* *we were doing what we can there, but we need more staff training, we need more resources for students* *I suppose it is the school thing now*	**L419,P.15** **L415,P.14** **L354,P.12** **L375,P.13**
Positive relationships with parents	Felt need to communicate with parents. Pushed by parental voice towards more inclusive content. Positive parent feedback.	*the reason why we did that was to communicate with parents better* *So we listened to that, and we take that on board, so we tried to add more of the LGBTQ+ information*	**L259,P.9** **L283,P.10**

Shaped by own experiences of sex ed	Memory of embarrassing contraceptive sex ed. Reflecting on own RSE experience.	*I remember very much, talking about a Femidom [laughs] and that's probably it, that's probably the only bit I remember*	**L215,P.8**
Student voice as catalyst for change	Student voice as motivator for change. Pupil feedback as catalyst for reflection. Desire to reflect young people's lived realities.	*But for our students, that's not enough. I think they demand more from us, which I think is really good* *people didn't like that we called an enrichment day because it didn't feel enriching* *because that's not realistic of the world*	**L291,P.10** **L343,P.12** **L170, P.6**
Frustration with other school approaches	Frustration with primary school's insufficient delivery. Recognising issues in primary school delivery. Increased pressure from picking up gaps in primary provision. Witness to knock on effect on pupil wellbeing.	*what I've said to those primary schools is actually, you're set them up to fail,* *But there were other schools, mostly primary schools who said 'we don't feel like we can do this* *they come to us in year 7, not knowing half as much as they should* *they end up saying something which is offensive, get upset, because they didn't mean it to be, it just all spirals*	**L429,P.15** **L451,P.16** **L431,P.15** **L432,P.15**
Mistrust of other faith schools	Inclusive content dependent on individual school not faith. Inconsistency in approach to LGBTQ+. across diocese. Distancing from conversative faith schools. Mistrust in other schools ability/intention to deliver. School success as exception to the rule. Distancing from conservative Catholic education.	*some schools really embraced it. But there were other schools* *for us, as a faith school, who are maybe more liberal as a school and more open as a school, we found that quite easy* *there are other schools, working with primary schools in our diocese as well, they've struggled more with that LGBTQ+ content* *PSHE curriculum fits really nicely in with our Catholic ethos, and I think, maybe more so as a [type of school] as well*	**L451,P.16** **L406,P.14** **L409,P.14** **L65,P.3**

Appendix N – Stage Four Analysis (Schools A and B)

School A	School B
Overarching Theme 1: Fraught Sexual Landscapes	
Normalisation of Sexual Harassment	*Social and sexual pressure*
Relationships as social event	*Resisting relationship pressure*
Feeling unsafe	*Rejecting idealisation of relationships*
Aligning self as ally	*Distancing from sexual behaviour and desire*
Gendered sexual expectations	*Discomfort discussing sex outside of school*
Fear of sexual consequence	*Fear of Sexual Consequence*
Sex negative moral framework	*Fear of being undesirable*
Empathy for male experiences	*Observing gender differences in relationships*
Fear of Judgement	*Empathy for Boy's Experiences*
Lack of understanding from male peers	*Normalisation of gender segregation at Primary.*
Gender segregation in primary	
Overarching Theme 2: (dis)engagement in RSE	
Discomfort as barrier to learning	*RSE evoking confusion*
Disengagement in lessons	*Clarity as key to understanding*
Familiarity as key for comfort	*Taboo topics as key events*
Dissatisfied with lack of inclusivity	*Desire to see self in RSE content*
Frustration with teaching approach	*Feeling alienated within RSE*
RSE as valuable	*Frustration with tokenistic approach to LGBTQ+ relationships.*
School as Proactive	*Disengaged by repetitive content*
Content inappropriate for life-stage	*RSE as uncomfortable experience*
Experiences not reflected	*School as sex-negative space*
	Impact of Covid
Overarching Theme 3: Conflicted Relationship to Catholicism	
Rejection of Catholic ethos	*Catholicism as authoritative voice in life*
Catholicism as authoritative voice	*Catholicism as unrelatable*
Normalisation of Catholic values	*Forging own religious identity*
Life beyond school	*Catholic Sexual Values as unattainable*
	Imbedded Catholic sexual values in RSE

Overarching Theme 4: Relationship to Adults	
Mistrust of teacher intervention	*Distrust of adults as advisors*
Mistrust of family	*Trust in maternal advice*
Family as trusted source	*Not feeling seen or heard by adults*
Desire to learn from those with shared experiences	
Overarching Theme 5: Reliance on self-education	
Anxiety and loneliness of not knowing	*Feeling deprived of 'full picture' of sex and relationships information*
Desire to feel prepared	*Desire to feel safe and prepared*
Learning through experience	*Anxiety of not knowing*
Social media as learning tool	*Collective Story Telling*
Lack of reliable sources	*Desire for more robust approaches to sexual violence*
Feeling deprived of information	*Developing own information networks*
Reliance on own information networks	*Distancing self from reliance on social media*
Resilience	