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Sexting and institutional discourses of child protection: The views of young people and providers of relationship and sex education

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This article focuses on discourses of child safety and protection of stakeholder organisations (SOs) and school pastoral care co-ordinators (PCCs) on educating young people about sexting. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with the representatives of four organisations who assist schools in the delivery of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE); and with three PCCs in three different types of secondary schools in Northern Ireland to ascertain how their school educates and responds to sexting. Focus groups were also conducted with 17 (10 girls and 7 boys) 16–17-year-olds to explore their views on sexting. The results of this study reveal that the predominant discourse in RSE is child safety and protection, and abstention from sexting. The three main groups (young people, SOs and PCCs) vary, however, in how they view sexting behaviour: the stakeholders are largely cautious and counsel against sending sexual pictures, while the young people regard it as normal behaviour. RSE provided by the schools is inadequate and unrealistic, and does not represent what actually goes on in young people’s sexual lives. Young people want to be consulted on the content of RSE lessons and resources; and RSE content should desist from telling them not to sext and enable them to explore appropriate relationship behaviours, including sexting. Teachers should feel confident in teaching such material and should have access to appropriate training.

Keywords: discourses on protection; gender stereotypes; relationships and sexuality education; sexting

Introduction

Young people engage in sexting for various reasons, ranging from seeking popularity to flirting, hoping to start a relationship and maintaining a relationship (Jørgensen \textit{et al.}, 2019). Sexting ranges from what can be classified as normal teenage development to intentionally wanting to victimise and cause harm (Holoyda \textit{et al.}, 2018). The prevalence and normality of sexting means that sex education programmes need to be realistic and address the various contexts in which young people will deal with sexting, as well as educating them to become ‘sexual citizens’ (Lamb, 2010, p. 82). To become ‘sexual citizens’ means discussing the importance of rights and those of others, as well as developing an understanding of issues such as consent, respect and empathy. Where the media encourages the ‘sexualisation of the female body’, it is
necessary to provide young people with education about acceptable and unacceptable behaviours in relationships, including equality and respect (Ringrose et al., 2013, p. 306).

However, in Northern Ireland, where the education system is segregated by religion, same-sex schooling and academic ability through grammar school selection, the teaching of and resources for Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) are generally inadequate. Teachers are not comfortable teaching about sex and sexuality, and the focus tends to be biological and prescriptive. The result is that young people are inadequately prepared to engage with issues such as sexting, sexualities, sexual exploitation and violence, and its prevalence in online environments (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children & Young People, 2009; York, 2019). Further, Northern Ireland is a conservative and religious society, whose Christian values strongly influence how RSE is taught, preventing open and inclusive dialogue about sex and sexualities (McBride & Schubotz, 2017). McBride & Schubotz (2017, p. 295) also report that conservative Christianity has ‘a strong influence over the education system, because schools receive government funding on the basis of having a Christian-based ethos and curriculum’. These values promote heteronormativity and abstinence until marriage, but inhibit young people’s sexual autonomy and expression, and undermine their status as sexual citizens. Transgender and gender non-conforming youth, for example, are deeply impacted by patriarchal, heteronormative structures that favour women and men who comply with these beliefs and practices (McBride & Schubotz, 2017). Beckett & Schubotz (2014) report that one-quarter of young people in Northern Ireland have had sexual intercourse under the age of 16; that 10% of females, compared to 1% of males, reported that they did not want to have sex but felt compelled to (p. 432); and 11% (n = 84) reported that an adult had tried to groom them (p. 435). Young people in Northern Ireland are as vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation as young people (and adults) everywhere, and should have access to good-quality RSE that confronts such issues honestly and openly.

There is very little research on young people’s attitudes to and experiences of sex in Northern Ireland (McBride & Schubotz, 2017; York, 2019; Templeton et al., 2020), and none on how, what we call here ‘stakeholder organisations’, contribute to the teaching of RSE in secondary schools. We present research from four such stakeholder organisations (SOs) and three pastoral care co-ordinators1 (PCCs) on their approaches to sexting. We also draw on data from young people who took part in focus group interviews for this research (see York, 2021 for a full account of young people’s attitudes to sexting). While sexting is a mainstream activity amongst young people in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, the predominant discourse of the SOs, in accordance with the values of the schools, is of child safety and protection, and the proscription, consequently, of sexual activities. Further, and despite living in a sexualised society, as we will report, the emphasis in RSE has been on protecting young people without taking into account ‘girls’ sexual agency, rights and pleasure’. RSE also tends to reinforce gendered stereotypes of ‘active, predatory, male sexuality’, in contrast to girls’ non-agentic sexuality (Renold & Ringrose, 2011, p. 391). We will argue, using a philosophical account of autonomy, that these paternalistic attitudes neither discourage nor safeguard against harmful sexting behaviours, and fail...
completely to encourage young people to discuss the pleasures of healthy and consensual sexual activity.

**Quality of and attitudes to relationship and sex education in Northern Ireland**

RSE is part of Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) in the Northern Ireland curriculum for primary schools. It is also a compulsory element of Learning for Life and Work (LLW) in secondary schools. In the secondary school RSE curriculum young people are expected to ‘develop an understanding of relationships and sexuality and the responsibilities of healthy relationships’ (Northern Ireland Curriculum, 2011, p. 18; Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment, 2017).

In a review of two teaching resource films—*Exposed* and *Tagged*—Dobson & Ringrose (2016) assert that neither film explored the viewpoint of the boy, and placed responsibility for the sexting incident on the girl. Dobson and Ringrose also state that sex education material should clearly equip all young people, regardless of their sex, with the knowledge and skills on how to use technology in a safe and responsible manner. Educational resources that place the blame solely on the individual (usually girls) should be avoided, while discussion should focus on why it is wrong to blame the victim. Walker *et al.* (2013) also suggest that education packages should not focus solely on legal consequences, but instead on educating young people about appropriate relationship behaviours. Research from Northern Ireland concords with these findings: girls (and women) here are also taught that they bear primary responsibility for moral rectitude. Victims, particularly women, continue to be blamed for the harm inflicted on them, usually by men, and RSE is ‘basic’, ‘unhelpful’, ‘useless’ and ‘biased’ (Belfast Youth Forum, 2019; Templeton *et al.*, 2020).

For many young people there is no distinction between their online and offline lives, which offers them many opportunities to find like-minded friends if they are Trans/LGBTQ and relevant social networks (e.g. Centre for Humane Technology, 2021), particularly if they live in conservative societies where sources of help may be few, as in Northern Ireland. Online engagement also, of course, brings great risks, and sexting is one such risk. The NSPCC’s (2017) Childline Services in Northern Ireland held over 2,000 sessions with young people who had been adversely affected by sexting, self-generated explicit images or sexual exploitation online. Sexting is the most viewed topic on the charity’s website, with nearly a quarter of a million page views per year. The charity also saw a 71% year-on-year increase of police-recorded ‘Obscene Publications’. Sexting is normal behaviour, and the reasons young people sext are complex and varied, ranging from the consensual sharing of images to non-consensual, exploitative and abusive behaviour (see York, 2021). Young people believe, according to Davidson (2014), that there is little non-judgemental support available on sexting, and parents and teachers are unlikely to be viewed as sources of help or support because of feelings of shame and embarrassment, being negatively judged, fear of losing their technology or being the subject of staffroom gossip. The police were not considered an option by any of the young people in the research conducted by York (2019) on attitudes to sexting amongst young people in a youth club.
in Northern Ireland. Rather, young people are most likely to obtain support from their friends or to go online (York, 2019).

Van Ouytsel et al., (2014) analysed previous research studies with the overall aim of advising school personnel about sexting, including possible prevention and intervention methods. The authors could find no research into the effectiveness of preventative and intervention measures for sexting. They did, however, emphasise the importance of schools adopting a climate in which such issues are openly discussed, so that young people would be encouraged to discuss issues they are experiencing. It is unclear how individual schools deliver RSE, and there is anecdotal evidence that some schools plan thoroughly for RSE delivery whilst others do not (National Council for Curriculum & Assessment, 2019). The Young Life and Times survey conducted in Northern Ireland, with 1,434 16-year-olds, reported that they received very few, if any, RSE lessons, even though RSE is a compulsory area of study, and the teenagers were also negative about how RSE was taught (Schubotz, 2012).

Possibly, as Ringrose et al., (2012) explain, teachers are embarrassed to teach such issues. The findings of a study conducted with teachers responsible for RSE in Northern Ireland by Hare (2014) revealed that these education professionals think that RSE is a valuable subject; however, many of them said that it was not seen as very important in their schools. The teachers expressed concerns about inadequate levels of training to equip them to deliver RSE and that there was no commitment to ongoing professional development: it is just not seen as a priority for cash-strapped schools (teachers were on strike between 2017 and 2020 over pay and conditions). Further, these teachers work in schools in which conservative Christian values prevail, and many will themselves be practising Christians (93% of the population identify as being Catholic or Protestant, according to the Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency, 2012).

Many schools, as we will discuss below, solicit religious leaning, abstinence-based RSE programmes by external providers such as Love for Life, because teachers feel more comfortable having someone they do not know speak to pupils about sensitive issues. This is also evident in the responses of young people in Phippen’s (2012) study, where young people felt able to speak to a stranger more honestly about RSE than to a teacher whom they could ‘risk bumping into’ after the lesson (p. 16). Phippen (2012) also reports that sexting issues are addressed by showing a film to a year group with little or no opportunity to discuss the topics raised; young people would prefer an opportunity to discuss such issues rather than ‘sit and be told about things’ (p. 16). Similarly, Jørgensen et al., (2019, p. 32) report that young people dislike assembly-like discussions, ‘no-one listens in assemblies’, and prefer frequent, informal conversational approaches to issues such as sexting rather than a year group assembly, the content of which would be ‘quickly forgotten’. Websites and web applications were also not a popular option amongst young people, who prefer instead ‘a more personal and relational communicative approach’ (p. 35); young people who participated in a study by York (2019) reported the same. Lee et al., (2015) assert that those who produce resources should be aware that most young people will likely engage in some sort of sexting behaviour, and so young people should be
educated about sexual ethics to help them identify why they are sexting, and to recognise if they are being coercive or being coerced. Patchin & Hinduja (2020) state that young people would not only be educated on the potential consequences of sexting, but would also be provided with information on how to minimise the ‘harm’. Providing this knowledge is not, according to Patchin & Hinduja (2020, p. 141), about ‘encouraging sexting behaviours, any more than sex education is about encouraging teens to have sex’. Rather, as we discuss later, good RSE should enable students to make informed, autonomous choices about sexual behaviours, including the double standards and sexism that plague these practices.

To support critical discussion of the findings of this study, we will use a philosophical conception of autonomy understood as ‘acting on motives, reasons, or values that are one’s own’ (Stoljar, 2015, p. 1). A person is deemed to be autonomous when she can make decisions free from any coercive influence. The autonomy of a girl may be circumscribed if she is denied the (informed) choice to freely decide on whether to send a sexual picture, or is put under pressure, for instance, to show her partner that she loves and trusts her/him by sending a sexually explicit picture. A girl may refuse to submit to pressure for a picture and may, after self-reflection, decide that such behaviour is inappropriate within a relationship, thus demonstrating her right to be autonomous and self-determining (MacKenzie et al., 2017). Young people live in a sexualised society, where the emphasis in RSE has been on protecting young people, which does not take into account ‘girls’ sexual agency, rights and pleasure, whilst reinforcing gendered stereotypes of “active, predatory, male sexuality in contrast to girls’ non-agentic sexuality’ (Renold & Ringrose, 2011, p. 391). The findings in this study support that analysis.

Methodology

The study described here was part of a wider study on sexting in which we conducted focus group interviews amongst members of a local youth club in Belfast (York, 2021), and interviews with three PCCs and four SOs. Sexting appears to be highly prevalent and widely reported in the media, yet so little seems to be known about the phenomenon of sexting in Northern Ireland. Young people in Northern Ireland are rarely given the opportunity to discuss how they view and understand issues such as sexting, and, consequently, little is known about how their views compare to those of schools and SOs whose remit is to educate on RSE, including risky behaviours. To address this gap within the context of Northern Ireland we asked the following research questions:

1. How do girls and boys aged 16–17 years understand sexting?
2. How do pastoral care co-ordinators understand the issue of sexting and what are their responses to it?
3. What are the different philosophies of stakeholder organisations in relation to sexting and how do they respond to sexting?
4. How do the stakeholder organisations’ responses and their philosophies contrast with those of the pastoral care co-ordinators and the perceptions of young people?
We used semi-structured interviews to collect data from four SOs and three PCCs. Individual semi-structured interviews were carried out with four SO representatives during March–July 2017 and three PCCs from three secondary schools during November and December 2018. The organisations had all commissioned research on young people, sex and sexuality. We focus on exploring the discourses of sexting among PCCs and representatives from SOs in educating young people. In the interviews with the PCCs we sought to explore how their schools currently respond to sexting and the kind of support available to young people. We were also interested in how the schools educate young people about sensitive issues, and whether there was training for staff.

We had planned to explore attitudes towards sexting with young people in schools; however, after a very low response rate we decided to change the research setting to a youth club. The first youth club we contacted agreed to take part. Focus group interviews were carried out with 17 young people (10 girls and 7 boys) aged 16–17 years. This youth club was not connected with any religious organisation or church. We conducted one mixed-sex focus group and four single-sex interviews (two for girls and two for boys) to encourage them to freely explore sensitive issues with members of the same sex (Davidson, 2014). The participants were keen to discuss the data-collection activities (which were based on vignettes) with the opposite sex. Consequently, we organised a mixed focus group. The focus group interviews were carried out during October and November 2018. We asked the young people to tell us about their experiences of RSE, and what schools could do to help young people deal with issues such as sharing nude pictures online.

A summary of the kind and role of the organisations is presented in Table 1. A summary describing each school is presented in Table 2.

In total, nine schools received information about the study. The PCC of one school declined as they were too busy to participate. The principals of five other schools did not respond to a follow-up telephone call or email. Three PCCs agreed to participate in our study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder organisation</th>
<th>Pseudonym of representative</th>
<th>Description of organisation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SO1</td>
<td>David</td>
<td>A third-sector faith-based organisation involved in delivering RSE to schools in Northern Ireland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SO2</td>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>A statutory organisation that operates in partnership with local communities to maintain law and order.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SO3</td>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>A third-sector organisation that campaigns to prevent child abuse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SO4</td>
<td>Judith</td>
<td>A third-sector organisation working with survivors of sexual abuse. It provides training on safety issues, including internet safety and sexual abuse.</td>
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</tbody>
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School principals, PCCs, SOs, the youth club leader and members of the youth club received details of the study, consent forms and how the results would be disseminated. Prior to the interviews, it was made clear to the SO representatives and PCCs that we were interested in the issue of sexting and that our role was not to be critical of the work their organisation or school was doing.

We sent the interview schedule to the interviewees in advance. To enable accurate transcription, the semi-structured interviews with the SOs and PCCs were audio-recorded with all but one PCC, and for this interview we took detailed notes. Simon & Goes (2013) propose that copies of transcribed interviews should be sent to interviewees to enable them to review the script and suggest any amendments. This ‘member checking’ enhances the ‘credibility’ of the research study (p. 3). For this reason, we forwarded copies of the transcribed interviews to each representative of the SOs and the PCCs to enable them to check for accuracy and fair representation of their views. We held an informed consent evening in the youth club and consent forms were given to the potential participants, 17 of whom agreed to take part. The youth club participants were not given copies of the transcribed focus group activities simply because of severe time constraints resulting from the delay in recruiting participants in schools. Following Bhana (2016), we invited the young participants to choose their own pseudonym, and we gave all adult participants a pseudonym. Ethical approval was granted by the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work Ethics Committee of Queen’s University Belfast.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted by the first author and reviewed by the second and third authors to ensure rigour for the SOs, PCCs and the youth club participants. Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 79) assert that thematic analysis is ‘a method of identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data’. We used their six stages of thematic analysis as suggested to analyse our data. The first two stages required us to become familiar with the data and to generate initial codes. After re-reading the interview transcripts, we also re-listened to the audio-recordings to check for ‘accuracy’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). The interview transcripts were inputted into a qualitative data analysis software package (NVivo), and we started to allocate preliminary codes. Stage three involved sorting the various codes into groups under one theme, for which we constructed a

<table>
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<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Pseudonym of pastoral care co-ordinator</th>
<th>Type of school</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>Co-ed integrated (Catholic and Protestant)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Lorna</td>
<td>Co-ed controlled grammar (Protestant)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>Co-ed controlled secondary (Protestant)</td>
</tr>
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thematic mind map, which was reviewed by the authors. It became apparent that when the codes were combined into initial themes, they illustrated the ways in which adults are trying to protect young people, such as the various ways in which they educate young people about sexting, encourage young people to report sexting, how young people are supported, and how the law and education protect young people from becoming victims and offenders. In stage four, we reviewed the codes identified during the previous stage. Five main themes emerged from the SOs (beliefs/understanding of sexting and the law, approach/delivery, content of preventative education, role of parents, schools) and six themes for schools (incidence and nature, beliefs/understanding of sexting, delivery of preventative education, response to incidents, role of parents, future support). The fifth stage involved ‘identifying the essence of what each theme is about’ (p. 92). The themes were reviewed in NVivo, and it became clear that some larger themes contained subthemes. For example, schools’ theme three (delivery of preventative education), which included how schools deliver education both in-house and use of SOs, resulted in a subtheme of how schools organise and plan for teaching of sensitive issues such as sexting. The theme names were then reviewed; as Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 93) assert, ‘names need to be concise, punchy, and immediately give the reader a sense of what the theme is about’. For example, the schools’ and SOs’ subthemes were changed from ‘don’t want to give young people ideas’ to ‘attitudes to using the term sexting’, which better explained what this subtheme was about. At the end of this stage, thematic mind maps were again produced illustrating the final main themes and subthemes, and which were extensively reviewed by the authors.

Findings

The findings are organised and presented under three themes: How sexting behaviour is viewed; Responses to sexting incidents; Relationships and Sexuality Education Lessons and Resources.

How sexting behaviour is viewed

The predominant discourse from the SOs was that of child safety: sexting is behaviour that young people should avoid for a variety of reasons, including that sexting is a form of sexual abuse and because it is selfish gratification. The PCCs adopted a similar approach, and did not endorse sexting behaviour. School staff are in loco parentis (Hunt, 2002), for whom the safety and welfare of young people is of the utmost importance to schools, resulting in a more cautious and conservative attitude towards young people and sexting. A common attitude among the SOs and PCCs was that young people are vulnerable, that they have not yet learnt how to risk assess, and lack competency and awareness. The PCCs, like the SOs, saw their role as one of educating young people to make informed decisions about sexting.

Three of the SOs (SO1, SO2 and SO4) regarded sexting as an activity that young people should avoid, as David, from SO1, for example, reported: ‘I guess, as an
organisation, we are saying don’t get involved, it’s not good’. David described sexting as ‘a selfish gratification’ by any young person who requests a picture, and this is also what they tell young people:

> What do we want to say to them even round the whole image thing? It is about selfish gratification of one party while the other one is made vulnerable, and that is not good relationship behaviour. (David, SO1)

The law is one of the main reasons why SO1, SO2 and SO4 take the position they do, and so aim to make young people aware of the legalities of sexting, as Lisa, from SO2, explained:

> What we want to do is educate to prevent. What we don’t want is kids being criminalised for something that they are unaware is a crime in the first place. Education—’please don’t do it’ and prevent them from becoming a victim and also equally prevent them from becoming an offender which is as important. (Lisa, SO2)

Young people’s unawareness of the legal ages for sexting was discussed by SO1. In their experience, young people are shocked when they are told that it is illegal to send a sexual image under the age of 18. By contrast, the interviews with the young people revealed that the boys ($n=5$) were aware that it was 18; the girls, however, were not aware that there was a legal age for sexting:

- Green, Aqua, Grey (f): I wasn’t aware that there was such a thing.
- Maroon (f): I think it is 18.
- Interviewer: It is 18.
- Maroon (f): I was just guessing.
- Interviewer: Did you ever hear about this in school?
- All girls: No.
- Green (f): No one knows about it.
- Maroon (f): Exactly, if they don’t know about it how can they obey the law.

The ages of consent for sex and sexting are contradictory. Lisa (SO2) explains that ‘this is a big part of our lesson: to warn of the differences [ages of consent] and it is contradictory’.

Interestingly, the young people were unsure why there was a law about sexting, no doubt because they see this as normal behaviour (see York, 2021 and below). Whilst the law was necessary to protect young people from paedophiles and child pornography, they felt that it should not be used for cases of consensual sexting between teenagers:

- Kinder (m): I think the law needs to be changed if it is from a peer-to-peer perspective with no pressure. If it is a paedophile, that is a totally different story.
- Easter Egg (m): The law is stupid... as long as there is consent and no pressure to send pictures, then the law should be changed.

Mark reported that SO3 had moved from the main message of ‘don’t do this, it is against the law’, or ‘don’t ever do this’ to acknowledging that sexting can be part of adolescent development: ‘it can be a part of a courtship relationship between two consenting adolescents’. Mark (SO3) was the only interviewee who highlighted the need for a strong message that sexting should not be viewed purely as a criminal issue because,
presently, fear of the law may discourage young people from seeking help and could result in feelings of shame:

They can be very much aware of the criminal side of it and that they have broken the law and they might be in trouble from that perspective. This would not encourage a young person to come forward and speak about an issue they have. I think that as a society we are saying that this is illegal and that adds to the shame. That informs how the parents are going to view it. (Mark, SO3)

In relation to the law, only SO4 asserted that sexting pictures is ‘child sexual abuse’ (Judith). The forwarding of such pictures is committing the ‘exact same offence that it would be if it was a paedophile online who obtained an image of a four-year-old nude’. However, SO4 was also aware that sexting can be a form of flirting among young people, as Judith acknowledged: ‘most of the sexting cases we come across, they are not in relationships, it is a form of flirting for the young people’.

All three PCCs reported having had to deal with incidents of sexting. Lorna from School B reported pictures being sent within romantic relationships and then being distributed after the relationship had ended. Cathy (School C) mused that pictures were a fun way to flirt. School A was the only school to regard sexting as a form of ‘bullying’:

The school would take a very serious stance and we regard it as bullying. It is totally inappropriate behaviour and when we have encountered it, it would be in the context of that kind of bullying behaviour. (Joseph School A)

In comparison, Schools B and C regarded sexting as a safeguarding/child protection issue.

How the majority of SOs and PCCs viewed sexting behaviour was in stark contrast to the views of young people, who believed it to be a normal activity:

The most important thing for adults to know about sexting and young people is that it is normalised amongst young people, it is an accepted behaviour. For every bad sexting incident that happens there are about 100 that have no repercussions. (Kinder, m)

Responses to sexting incidents

Again, the responses revealed that the primary attitude to sexting was child protection, and that sexting incidents could involve the police. Nevertheless, whether such an incident was to be regarded as a criminal offence would depend on the context. SO2 was the only organisation whose remit includes responding to sexting incidents to enforce the law. Whether an offence has been committed is dependent on several factors, as Lisa explains:

It could be classed as unlawful depending on the content, the people who are sending it, and the motive behind the message being sent. It really depends on the content of the conversation. It could be sexualised conversation, but it might not meet the threshold for a criminal offence. It could be a criminal offence in that it is sexual conversation, but the people are of a peer age and there is nothing abusive or coercive about it... then we deal with it, single agency social services for an education package. If there is evidence of an offence it is robustly investigated. It is a case-by-case scenario. (Lisa, SO2)
Lisa was unable to think of any cases of adolescent sexting that resulted in prosecution.

The PCCs differed in their responses to a sexting incident. Their primary concern was child protection and prevention. School B reported all incidents to the police: ‘we have a legal responsibility and they are under the age of 18. Once I report it, it is a police matter’ (Lorna). In comparison, Cathy (School C) preferred parents to contact the police. However, the school would deal with it on a case-by-case basis and, depending on the parents, would then contact the police. Joseph (School A), who viewed sexting as bullying behaviour, did not advise parents on what to do:

*We don’t really advise them to do so or not to do so. I mean, we would endorse it when they have no option, and we would say that is something they are perfectly entitled to do.* (Joseph, School A)

The young people had a very different attitude and did not report sexting incidents to adults (parents and teachers). This was because of embarrassment, fear of being judged negatively and being the subject of staffroom gossip, findings which accord with those we reported earlier. Young people were more likely to seek help and support from friends. Reporting incidents to the police would only, according to the girls, be considered if the incident was extremely serious; if, for example, a girl was contemplating suicide. A deterrent to contacting the police was their fear of losing their phones or the police contacting their parents.

Relationships and sexuality education lessons and resources

The SOs and PCCs all stated that the aim of RSE is to educate young people about sensitive issues such as sexting in order to enable them to make good choices. However, this is in stark contrast to how the young people themselves actually experience RSE, citing a lack of detail on sexting as well as receiving few, if any, lessons in school that addressed sex or sexting. The young people in this study were keen to learn about sensitive issues but, like participants in other studies (Phippen, 2012; Jørgensen et al., 2019), they were clear that whole school year group assembly-style presentations were not beneficial, preferring informal, conversational approaches with people who were informed and up-to-date about the lives of young people. SO1, SO2 and SO4 usually opted for a presentation-style approach to speak to large groups of young people. However, with smaller groups, SO1 and SO4 reported that they use a more interactive workshop approach. Mark from SO3 preferred to take an informal approach in small groups:

*I frame it as a conversation. An awful lot of the time you can get the vast majority of the safety messages coming from the young people themselves in conversation as opposed to you standing up there as some sort of figure of authority giving the information to them. I don’t think you can get the message across in an assembly and I am not sure the kids are engaged.* (Mark, SO3)

Schools B and C cover sensitive issues such as sexting through the topic area of internet safety in Information Communications Technology (ICT) classes, taken by
ICT teachers. All schools teach sensitive issues in the curriculum area of LLW, which was often not their main subject:

There are some teachers who would have quite a lot of LLW on their timetable but on the whole, it would be teachers who don’t have LLW as their main subject. (Cathy, School C)

School A was the only school to comprise a team of teachers who volunteered to teach sensitive issues, and who felt at ease teaching such topics. SO2 addressed sexting as an online safety topic, whereas SO1 and SO3 addressed it through relationship education. SO4 did not specify whether they focus solely on online safety or relationship behaviours. SO1 and SO3 differed from SO2 in terms of how sexting is addressed, believing that young people need to be educated about healthy relationships and having respect for themselves and others. SO1 used the short film Exposed as an introduction to sexting: ‘we talk about the motivation: “Why would somebody do that? Why would that girl [Dee] choose to send that picture?” Dee’s story is very good, very effective’. The film Exposed is about a young girl (Dee) who sends pictures to her boyfriend who then shares them with his friends. Dee is blamed for this.

The young people preferred SOs to speak to them about RSE. However, they were not keen on being talked to in large year groups, which the SOs commonly do, as Maroon (f) explains: ‘in a large year group talk you can easily go on your phone and not pay attention’. They expressed a preference for informal discussions in small groups taken by non-school staff:

Blue (f): I think they should have more talks about it, like say you [interviewer] coming in and actually talking to them. Schools baby talk us, do you know what I mean? It’s not a proper talk.

Milky Bar (m): Talk to young people like the way you [interviewer] are talking with us. Schools baby talk us, do you know what I mean? It’s not a proper talk.

The young people were uncomfortable having teachers sit in on SO talks. They were also acutely aware that teachers were often not comfortable discussing issues dealt with in an SO session. SO1 reported that they leave teaching materials with schools for teachers to use with their classes. However, as Grey (f) explained, in her experience, this does not happen because of teacher discomfort: ‘our teacher was supposed to talk to us after [SO1] came in but I don’t think he feels comfortable because we are all girls, and he is a man’. Maroon (f) reported that young people are also uncomfortable about talking to their teachers after a SO visit: ‘if you were talking about it afterwards with your teacher, you would just feel really uncomfortable’.

Some of the boys explained that sexting was discussed in the context of keeping safe online, whereas other boys explained that they never had any lessons on sex and sexting, and any information they had was gained from the streets. By contrast, the girls reported having been given information in school, but that such information lacked detail and did not answer their questions.

Blue (f): This is probably the first time we have got somebody like you [interviewer] coming in and explaining this to us. Schools don’t really want to tell us things and they avoid it.

Rainbow (f): They [schools] sugar coat it.

Blue (f): Yeah, they say, like, the basic details but don’t proper go into it, and we are sitting there going ‘we want questions answered for us’.
The boys also discussed how schools, in order to minimally comply with policy, cover only the basic issues:

Lion Bar (m): Personally, and this is maybe just me being cynical, when our school does it you just think 'they are doing it to tick a box'. It is, like, they have got a policy on it and it is a very strict policy of ‘don’t do it’ and if it does happen then it is ‘we told you not to do it’. They need to be more realistic.

None of the SOs engage young people in the planning of their education programmes. With respect to schools, School C was the only school not to consult with pupils on planning RSE but did consult with parents; and Schools A and B had consulted with the pupil council. Joseph (School A) was the only PCC to believe that there are good teaching materials about sexting and referred to resources produced by an online anti-bullying forum (Northern Ireland) and SO2. Both Lorna (School B) and Cathy (School C) agreed that there was a paucity of resources that can be used in lessons about sexting.

The young people in this study discussed how resources covering the topic of sexting are often unrealistic. They also disliked how resources place the blame for sexting incidents on the girl, and also stereotypically portray boys as always wanting a sexual picture:

Orange (f): I don’t like the way it is always a girl, never a boy. Boys can do it, but it is always a girl and they are making out that girls are sluts. There is never a video of a boy who has sent a dirt and it is never getting it from a boy’s point of view. Like, every video, it is always girls sending nudes, it is wrong to send nudes, they are directing it at mostly girls.
Lion Bar (m): It makes all the wee lads out to be savages. Not all boys would want a picture.
Easter Egg (m): Yeah, like sexual predators.

These young people believed that resources should emphasise to everyone that it is wrong to coerce someone into sending a picture, to distribute the picture without consent or in revenge, and to fairly represent the activities of all sexes.

Young people dislike resources that place the blame for sexting on the girl whilst enforcing stereotyped gendered beliefs that all boys want a picture. Films that focus on the behaviour of girls and the negative impacts of sexting on their reputations, without exploring what boys do or the negative consequences for their own wellbeing, are a complacent omission that perpetuates gender stereotypes (see Dobson & Ringrose, 2016). These assumptions place the moral onus on girls to police their behaviour and guard against inappropriate sexual behaviour. Neither the schools nor the SO representatives described any kind of teaching that challenged gender stereotypes. The main message being given to young people is ‘don’t get involved in sexting’ and focuses on the negative consequences; however, such ‘just say no’-type messages are unlikely to be effective, as young people are aware of the potential consequences, and derive pleasure from sexting, particularly within the context of consensual sexting (MacKenzie et al., 2017).

Limitations

This study focused on sexting amongst heterosexual young people, and does not, obviously, offer insights on LGBT young people’s experiences. It so happened that
the youth club that agreed to participate did not include young people from these communities. We actively sought to involve a prominent SO that advocates on behalf of LGBT young people and speaks in schools on various RSE topics. Unfortunately, despite numerous attempts, we were unable to contact the representative to arrange an interview.

A further limitation is that this is a small-scale study with only 17 young people in one youth club in one part of the country. Also, because the study was delayed by 6 months, we were unable to send them copies of the transcripts, which would have been in keeping with our stated aims of consulting young people. However, a lot of the data collected with the young people in this study correlates strongly with existent sexting research, including (limited) research from Northern Ireland. Likewise, only three PCCs were interviewed. We do know, however, that the views expressed here are not dissimilar to what has been reported elsewhere. Northern Ireland, as we have stated above, remains a deeply religious and conservative region of the UK.

Discussion

The predominant aim of schools and organisations providing RSE support is, understandably, to protect young people from abuse and exploitation, and they consequently view adolescent sexting as a behaviour to be avoided. However, laudable though this aim is, without consulting young people directly on what they understand about such issues, their approach to safety will be widely off the mark of what young people do, in fact, need and want in order to be safe and happy. Young people are aware of the risks of sexting, both to themselves and others. It may be time to give them more credit for what they know, understand and experience. Young people should be given the opportunity to explore sensitive issues such as sexting and pornography, and to be able to do this, schools should develop realistic, thought-provoking resources for RSE—they do not want to be ‘baby talked’ through these discussions. However, as we stated above, RSE is not relevant to young people’s lived experiences. It is ‘sugar-coated’ and schools seem to do it, according to our participants, to ‘tick a box’.

Young people are eager to learn about sexting and similar issues in school but they do not get the opportunity to do so, and the response is typically risk-averse: ‘just don’t do it’. But this is unrealistic and unhelpful, and may result in the person being shamed, blamed and stigmatised. As the NSPCC (2020) have reported, sexual offences against young people are increasing, not decreasing, despite their education on abstinence, avoidance, protection and safeguarding. Adopting a conservative approach to the teaching of RSE, as the SOs and PCCs in this research do, advising abstinence or failing to accept that young people are sexual beings who have sexual rights may, in fact, increase their vulnerability to harm, particularly as social media is an ineradicable part of young people’s lives. For example: there were 1,264 recorded sexual offences (rape, sexual assault, sexual grooming) against adolescents aged 11 to 17 in 2018/19 in Northern Ireland (p. 33). The NSPCC (2020) report that boys overwhelmingly perpetrate the abuse, and that girls are typically over-represented among victims. Further, the average onset of harmful sexual behaviour among boys coincides with the onset of puberty at around the ages of 13 to 14 (p. 36). Young people must
have access to this knowledge. With respect to online sexual offences, the NSPCC’s (2020) data shows that the total number of recorded sexual communication offences against adolescents aged 11 to 15 was 92, which represents a 575% increase from 16 recorded offences in 2016/17 (p. 39). Necessary as this education is, it is unlikely to happen in Northern Ireland where an overwhelming majority of pupils attend schools that are either Catholic maintained or have controlled status (with a non-denominational Christian ethos) (Department of Education, 2020).

By failing to address what adolescents really want to know about sex, we do not nurture young people to be the fully autonomous agents they need to be if they are to negotiate the world of sexual communication and activity. To be autonomous is to be self-determining and self-choosing, the possession of which is obtained by being nurtured to critically reflect on preferences, values, goals and aspirations, and to act authentically in accordance with these. It also means having access to an education that meaningfully, openly and honestly engages with difficult and challenging issues such as those discussed here. Young people who receive inadequate RSE that does not discuss, say, misogyny, gender discrimination and inequality, and how these manifest in practice, or to respect that ‘no’ in fact means ‘no’, may remain prey to distorted beliefs about sex, sexuality and gender, and to manipulation, coercion or oppression (NSPCC, 2020). If we do not encourage young people to be informed about RSE, we may be disabling them from having control over their environments and from making critically informed choices, and in the process support patriarchal norms and values that subordinate girls and women to boys and men, and in which girls and women continue to be held responsible for the sexual harms perpetrated against them by men. The young people in this study are aware of the double standards in operation and the stereotyping of, for example, ‘all lads as savages’ and ‘sexual predators’. Protection from sexual violence and exploitation is critical, but advising mere avoidance or abstinence is ineffective and dangerous, as the young people in this study insisted. Northern Ireland has progress to make in this area, as evidenced by the fact that same-sex marriage and abortion were legalised only in 2020, and only as a result of the British Parliament not the government in Stormont, many of whose representatives are resolutely conservative and Christian, and adverse to the kind of RSE we advocate.

Conclusion

Young people need RSE that corresponds to reality, and there is an urgent need to radically rethink RSE because it is not fit for purpose. RSE must meet the needs of all young people, not just those who comply with heteronormative norms (McBride & Schubotz, 2017).

To help ensure that young people are being given the information that is relevant to them, they should be involved in the planning of RSE, a strategy that has been advised in Northern Ireland by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (2015) and in the Republic of Ireland by the National Council for Curriculum & Assessment (2019). There are clear advantages to this approach. Young people have direct experience of what is happening in their worlds that could realistically and meaningfully inform RSE resources: the language used, descriptions that
accurately capture what happens in young people’s relationships and realistic scenarios that could challenge stereotypes that seem to be so pervasive in curricular materials. It would be a bold step, but giving voice to young people to speak about issues they know best about, and to direct the creation and content of resources, would do a great deal to bring authenticity to RSE.

NOTE

1 In Northern Ireland, pastoral care co-ordinators are usually deputy heads with responsibility for pupil well-being.

References


