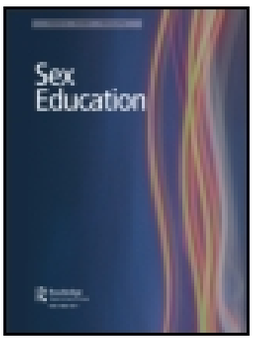

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Primary school parents' perspectives on relationships and sexuality education in Queensland, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Primary school educators in Australia are often uncertain about parents' perspectives when it comes to teaching about relationships and sexuality education in schools. Teachers, school leaders, parents and the broader community continue to struggle with the best way to educate children about the many topics that fall under the banner of relationships and sexuality education. This paper explores the perspectives of primary school parents in Queensland, Australia adding to the growing body of research in internationally about parents' perspectives on relationships and sexuality education in primary schools.

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Introduction

International research has documented the benefits of relationships and sexuality education[1] (RSE). Children and young people who receive RSE experience life-long benefits to their health and wellbeing and the potential for more meaningful intimate relationships (European Expert Group on Sexuality Education 2016). Research on Comprehensive RSE has focused on sexual health outcomes and has been shown to increase the likelihood to have protected sex (Wu 2010); reduce teenage pregnancy and abortion rates; reduce rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) (Burns and Hendriks 2018; European Expert Group on Sexuality Education 2016); and delay sexual debut. Comprehensive approaches to RSE result in better sexual health outcomes than other approaches (Weaver, Smith, and Kippax 2005). Whilst the benefits of RSE have been acknowledged within education curricula and institutions broadly across the globe, understanding more about parents'[2] perspectives is also important.

Relationships and sexuality education in Queensland, Australia

Relationships and sexuality education (RSE) is a controversial topic in primary school education in Australia, including Queensland. This is evidenced by submissions to a recent parliamentary inquiry investigating Queensland state schools and how to improve the delivery of sex education.[3] Submissions included a range of perspectives including calls for sex and relationships education to be compulsory, calls for comprehensive content

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Table 1. Overview of themes concerning primary school parents perspectives on relationships and sexuality education.

The need for RSE	What RSE should look like	RSE in practice
The world has changed: • The internet – contemporary access to pornography both intentionally and unintentionally • Children often more tech savvy than parents	Ethos: • Positive, strengths-based approach • Holistic framing • Children as active participants in their learning • Importance of professional training	Actual RSE: • Uncertainty about ethos or topics covered
Mitigating risk: • Focus on prevention and mitigating risk for children • RSE can limit the impact of exposure to negative messaging	What RSE should cover: • Relationship skills • Managing emotions • Recognition of complex layers of content • Shift away from shame and silence	Parental Uncertainty: • Considerable parental uncertainty evident despite strong views about the need for RSE, what RSE should encompass and who should make content decisions
Responsibility: • Society has a responsibility to children • Parents and schools have a shared responsibility • Parents not aware that RSE is in the curriculum	Who decides: • School seen as responsible for content design and communication with families • Parents should be kept informed, but not necessarily have input into content • Belief that RSE is developed with content matter experts	

and calls from parents for RSE timing and content to be parents' responsibility (Caldwell 2017). Submissions highlighted the ongoing tension between education authorities' responsibilities to the curriculum and needs of students and parents' myriad expectations regarding the education of their children.

The Australian Curriculum defines comprehensive sex education as RSE (ACARA 2010-present) and provides an overarching guide to curriculum content. However, education departments in states and territories in Australia are responsible for their own jurisdictions and often create their own syllabuses. The Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) refers educators in Queensland directly to the Australian Curriculum for health education content including RSE (State of Queensland (QCAA) 2019).

Debate over parent or school responsibility for RSE has been topical since the 1950s and 1960s when RSE was non-existent in schools and thought of as a private matter, not for public discussion, including in the classroom. However, since the 1970s, a shift in social expectations has seen responsibility for educating young people about RSE moves from being a parent responsibility towards that of the teacher in the classroom. More recently, greater importance has been placed on partnerships between schools and parents and for the inclusion of RSE at school and at home. While parents are a key source of information in shaping children's understandings of relationships and sexuality within the home environment, education at home is most effective when complemented by education in school and vice versa (UNESCO 2018).

Parent perspectives

Parents' perspectives on RSE have remained fairly consistent in Australia since the 1970s highlighting the commonly held view that RSE is important at both home and school. However, there has been a shift in views about when parents believe RSE should begin. For example, Macbeth, Weerakoon, and Sitharthan (2009) reported that 71% of the parents (117 parents) in their study believed that RSE should start in primary school. This figure contrasts with the 82.9% (342 parents) of parents of primary aged children reported by Robinson, Smith, and Davies (2017) a few years later. Whilst the two studies differed in their methods and sample, in the decade between 2009 and 2017, a slight growth in parent support for RSE in primary schools may be inferred from the findings of these two studies.

There is considerable controversy when it comes to parents' perspectives on the content of RSE. In one study, parents rated body image, the correct names of genitals and personal safety as the most important topics to introduce in the early years (Macbeth, Weerakoon, and Sitharthan 2009). More recent research (Robinson, Smith, and Davies 2017) has found that important topics for parents included developing media literacy, child safety, child's rights and positive RSE to counter negative discourses related to sex and sexuality. Dyson and Smith (2012) found parents were concerned about their children being exposed to more sexualised media content. Additionally, Ferfolja and Ullman (2017) found that parents expressed concerns that schools may convey negative messages about diversity in relation to sex, gender and sexuality, highlighting increasing concern by parents about curricula that do not engage with diversity.

Debate also exists about age appropriateness and the inclusion of RSE in primary education, as some parents argue that primary school children are 'too young' (Robinson, Smith, and Davies 2017). Issues such as earlier maturation, parents not educating their children, the commodification of sex, and children's right to knowledge are used to counter the argument that formal education contexts should not include RSE in their curriculum or when sensitive topics are debated (Goldman 2008). Debates about content will no doubt continue due to ongoing beliefs about childhood innocence (Gittins 1998) and heteronormativity, whereby gender and sexuality diversity are positioned as 'not normal' (Warner 1991).

With these issues in mind, this study aimed to analyse parent perspectives on RSE in primary schools in Queensland, Australia and contribute to the growing body of research on parents' perspectives on RSE in Australia.

Theoretical underpinnings

Our work was interested in how the parents of primary school-aged children construct knowledge about the RSE provided in schools. Parents' perspectives are influenced by cultural understandings of relationships and sexuality as well as broader theoretical frameworks permeating understandings of sex, sexuality and relationships. Importantly, historical and other factors influence what is thought about sex and sexuality, normalising some identities and sexual behaviours, while marginalising others (Foucault 2008).

Discursive framings of sex, gender and sexuality in school-based RSE shape ideas about normal and deviant behaviour (Thorogood 2000). Power is enacted through these framings

and, as a result, children and young people learn to self-govern and self-regulate their bodies, sexuality and relationships through 'techniques of the self' (Foucault 1988). Seen this way, RSE provides a platform for engagement with normative discourses about sex, sexuality and relationships. Through the curriculum and in other ways, education departments and other state institutions are deeply implicated in these processes (Burns 2013).

Methods

Participants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six parents in Brisbane (the capital city of the State of Queensland, Australia). The main criterion for participation in the study was that participants were the parents of one or more children attending years 4, 5 or 6 (approximately ages 9–12 years old) in primary school.

Procedure

Participants were recruited via email advertisement distributed through professional and personal networks of team members at the University of Queensland and the family planning organisation: True Relationships and Reproductive Health.

Despite calling for a range of parents and carers, mothers and/or fathers to participate, all participants were mothers, white and middle class. Parents had a total of 13 children (aged between 8 and 20 years) between them, 7 of whom were in the target grade levels. These children were all enrolled in public or private schools in Brisbane.

Interviews were conducted by four undergraduate social science students at the University of Queensland as part of a study conducted under the supervision of the first author. Interviews, which lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, focused on parents' perspectives, attitudes and values regarding their children's receipt of RSE at school. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Ethics approval was granted by the University of Queensland.

Analysis

Qualitative thematic analysis was used to develop themes from the interviews (Braun and Clarke 2006). The first author worked systematically through the data set, generating 161 codes. These codes were then sorted into preliminary themes and sub-themes. Themes were then reviewed to determine whether the data exhibited coherence and themes were distinct from each other. During this process, there was a considerable reworking of the codes and themes resulting in the identification of three main themes: the need for RSE; what RSE should look like; and RSE in practice, with each containing a number of subthemes. In reporting on these, all data has been de-identified and pseudonyms are used.

Findings and discussion

Of the three main themes, the first theme, the need for RSE, highlighted the commonly held view that RSE is necessary in primary schools and had three subthemes: 'the world

has changed', 'mitigating risk' and 'responsibility'. The second theme, what RSE should look like, described parent's perspectives on what RSE should look like and comprised three sub themes: 'ethos', 'what RSE should cover' and 'who decides'. The third theme, RSE in practice comprised two subthemes: 'actual RSE' and 'parental uncertainty.

The need for RSE

Consistent with findings from previous research in Australia (see, e.g., Robinson, Smith, and Davies 2017), parents in this study recognised the need for children at primary school to receive RSE and were overwhelmingly supportive of this.

> It was the RSE programme, so it was relationship and sex education. They covered everything about body parts, babies and just everything, relationships, everything [. . .] I think it's perfect and I'm also agreeing with what's been spoken about yeah so for her age. (Emily, 42. Two children at primary school, 9 and 8 years of age).

> I think that having conversations at home in conjunction with anything learned at school is probably the best way to make sure you get the best outcome of the education. (Anna, 38. One child at primary school, 12 years of age).

Parents explained that they feel the world was changing due to the influence of digital technology, that RSE could help mitigate risk to children and that schools have a responsibility to educate children about RSE.

The world has changed

Parents indicated their children we growing up in a different world to that which they had experienced:

> I'm 38. I didn't grow up with the Internet right. I was 16 or 17 when we got the Internet at home. And, of course, it was really hard to access porn online. And I didn't have it on my phone or anything. So, our kids growing up, there's this divide between us – they grow up embedded in it, and we haven't (Julie, 35. One child at primary school, 11 years of age).

Here, Julie's comment signals how much the Internet has changed in the last two decades, both in terms of what can be accessed and how content can be accessed; with pornography widely available through various types of devices. Later in the interview, Julie described a situation in which her child asked her what an explicit word they had heard meant:

> He heard the word cunnilingus or something for example and I said you are a bit too young for that and he said I'll just Google it.

Ways of learning have also changed, with children being now in a position to access practically any information they want (Collier-Harris and Goldman 2017). The extent to which technology is embedded in the lives of children far exceeds that of their parents

> I feel like the kids know a lot more about the Internet than what I do, so I kind of feel like if they are accessing stuff online, I might not even know and so I feel like they have more knowledge (Julie, 35. One child at primary school, 11 years of age).

Increased access to the Internet means that while children may not themselves be accessing content, they can come into contact with inappropriate or pornographic content though others:

> My daughter was involved in another situation where another child was looking up . um . pornographic images (Zara, 37. One child at primary school, 9 years of age).

Parents drew a distinction between actual sex and how sex is depicted in pornography, worrying that their children may not understand this. 'It's not like you know the way they're seeing sex through the Internet, yeah', said Zara. This impacted on what parents perceived their children should learn about RSE.

Mitigating risk

When speaking of the need for RSE, some parents focused on prevention and the need to mitigate risk for their children. Little mention was made of other perspectives on RSE which might imply a more comprehensive approach including a focus on the pleasurable and emotional aspects of relationships and sexuality.

> If you don't know certain things about your own body and the way relationships work, and the risks involved, then you're not going to be in a good position to protect yourself (Anna, 38. One child at primary school, 12 years of age).

This same parent continued,

> Young people in … um … you know are finding themselves in these situations where they become sexually active and then they need um you know STD tests, and unplanned pregnancies (Anna, 38. One child at primary school, 12 years of age).

This focus on the biological aspects of puberty, sexually transmitted infections and reproduction is in line with an approach to RSE that characterises sex in term of risk (Jones 2011). International research on RSE suggests that almost half of school-based RSE for children under 12 tends to takes this kind of approach (Roien, Graugaard, and Simovska 2018).

The provision of RSE in school was recognised as also potentially limiting the effects of negative messages children are exposed to

> Yeah I mean it's just whatever er ah what can circumvent them around some of the stuff that will have a negative impact versus good knowledge to know. Um, that will be helpful so I think … you know somethings can normalise certain behaviours that aren't good for them that can lead to different … I don't know (Zara, 37. One child at primary school, 9 years of age).

RSE was also seen as mitigating the risks posed by other children:

> Because the kids I'm concerned about aren't my kids, the kids I'm concerned about are the kids that aren't getting this information from anywhere else, that will be interacting with my kids (Kelly, 44. Two children at primary school, 9 and 10 years of age).

Here, Kelly highlights how variation in children's access to information impacts the accuracy of the information they share with each other. There is a choice to be made here: between leaving children to find their own way through a myriad information streams that vary in accuracy or providing scientifically accurate RSE to all children.

Responsibility

Parents expressed the view that as a society, there is a responsibility for children to receive RSE, and that children have the right to education.

> I think . . . umm . it's important to be educated about things like this and I mean um not sure I'm not saying it's the school or parental responsibility, but I think knowledge is power (Anna, 38. One child at primary school, 12 years of age).

Emily also suggested that comfort in talking about sex, sexuality and relationships was important.

> I think parents, I think school, I think anybody. Some people are not comfortable talking about it, some people are (Emily, 42. Two children at primary school, 9 and 8 years of age).

Emily's use of the word 'comfort' raises a number of questions. In particular, where does responsibility for teaching children about RSE lie, if nobody around is comfortable? Julie also indicated that children should be able to access information from a range of sources.

> I think it's really important that kids get a lot of information from as many different, less dangerous sources as possible (Julie, 35. One child at primary school, 11 years of age).

All children have the right to RSE and the family should not be the only source of information. As Laura pointed out, not all children will have access to RSE via a parent:

> What about kids that maybe don't have a parent or aren't . . . don't have that relationship with their parents, what about kids that are in foster care? (Laura 48. One child at primary school, 10 years of age).

The view was expressed that parents and schools working in combination was perhaps the best approach to adopt. 'I think that having conversations at home in conjunction with anything learned at school is probably the best way to make sure you get the best outcome of the education', said Anna. However, this quote indicates that the process should be led by the school, with the home supporting it. Children having access to RSE at school would mean that all children receive the same message.

> It's totally a combination of parents and schools, and it's probably more important for schools in some ways because there are a lot of parents that either can't or won't talk about these things with their children or might have a very unhealthy view of things themselves . . . but doing it in schools, provides assurance that everybody gets the same message (Kelly, 44. Two children at primary school, 9 and 10 years of age).

Here, the school is positioned as providing a safety net to ensure a level of accuracy and consistency around the provision of RSE to all children. As the Australian Curriculum and Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) syllabi are accessible to the public, perhaps schools could play a role in supporting parents and families to more readily access the content of learning via publically available curricula.

Findings tended to suggest that at present RSE is not present in the curriculum and is not delivered consistently across all schools. This was highlighted by Kelly, drawing on personal experience from children in her blended family:

> I think that's quite appalling. I think that that same curriculum should be mandated at both schools [my children attended], and [the] same with sexual health and relationship issues,

> [they] shouldn't just be rolled out at government schools, but should also be rolled out at the private schools (Kelly, 44. Two children at primary school, 9 and 10 years of age).

The Australian Curriculum and the Queensland Syllabus which are relevant to both government and independent schools do in fact include reference to RSE. However, it is largely unknown how RSE is delivered in primary schools in Queensland.

What RSE should look like

The second theme, what RSE should look like, described parents' perspectives about what RSE should encompass and who was best placed to make content decisions.

The importance of ethos

A first subtheme explored how RSE was framed and delivered, focusing on sexual ethics and approach. In their comments, some parents focused less on RSE content than the flavour of the message, wanting their children to learn about RSE within a positive frame.

> I would just want to make sure they're framing things appropriately to not inadvertently reinforce notions around rape or pornography or objectification of women, having the reframe be more positive around self-respect and boundaries and healthy relationships rather than introducing kids unnecessarily to concepts like rape, so that we're not then inadvertently socialising towards those societal norms, so it really depends on how the message is delivered and how it's framed (Kelly, 44. Two children at primary school, 9 and 10 years of age).

Kelly's comments here focus on the ethics of relationships and sexuality education and raise issues about self-respect and boundaries. Elsewhere, Robinson (2013) provides the example of a traumatised 5-year-old boy who was pinned down by two girls who 'touched and kissed him' (p. 141) and proceeds to discuss the ethics associated with the situation using Carmody's work on sexual ethics education (Carmody 2009). Children need support in reflecting on their thoughts, feelings and behaviours, being responsible for their actions and learning reflexive thinking which promotes control over their actions and the ability to learn and grow.

Another parent's comments highlight the value of RSE taking a holistic approach in line with research which speaks to the importance of holistic frameworks for helping children develop their own capacity for decision-making (Duffy et al. 2013).

> I feel like we need to help children with this sex and safe sex and all the rest of it, it's probably got more to do with your whole of life, the way you view things in general rather than sex in particular. And so that's why I feel it will be good for kids to have more holistic approach to sex education and relationships (Julie, 35. One child at primary school, 11 years of age).

The view was also expressed that children have the right to ask questions and providing a safe space in which to do so is vital.

> I feel like if they asking the questions they need a safe space to be told about it, so it's not so much that I think the school shouldn't talk about this or shouldn't talk about that because if the kids asking, then they are going to need to know in a safe environment (Julie, 35. One child at primary school, 11 years of age).

Here, Julie highlights the importance of acknowledging children as active participants in their own learning. Julie later expressed concern about the possibility that the person delivering RSE might not themselves have a healthy ethos or perspective and this could have a negative impact on children and young people:

> I don't know whether they have their own personal prejudices or experiences that they are going to then infer onto the children because they are teachers, they're not sexual health nurses or relationship professionals (Anna, 38. One child at primary school, 12 years of age).

While this implies that sexual health nurses or relationship professionals do not have personal prejudices they might share with children (while teachers do), both teachers and other educators in a school are bound by the law and teachers are also bound by the codes of conduct of their employers. Other interviewees expressed the view that professional training is necessary for RSE to be delivered appropriately.

I think so long as the facilitator has had appropriate training and resources (Kelly, 44. Two children at primary school, 9 and 10 years of age).

> I definitely think there are some things that trained professionals can provide, some level of education that trained professionals can provide. Particularly, I guess, psycho-social or emotional stuff (Julie, 35. One child in primary school, 11 years of age).

Here, there is an acknowledgement that regardless of who provides the RSE, parents want assurance that the individuals concerned have received relevant training.

What RSE should cover

The content of RSE has always been controversial in Australia (see, e.g., Milton 2004; Goldman 2008; Robinson, Smith, and Davies 2017) and some parents spoke to what RSE should cover. Julie provided one such example when talking about the importance of teaching about feelings and managing disappointment:

> Navigating disappointments in relationships, so that you are not sending people's nude photos around when you get pissed off. Because the kids are taught if somebody sends you an intimate photo within the construct of a relationship, they are taught it's illegal to send that afterwards without their consent obviously . . . so teaching children how to manage disappointment within relationships is probably very vital (Julie, 35. One child at primary school, 11 years of age).

The importance of relationship skills was stressed in the following comment:

> I think healthy relationships, um, things around domestic and family violence, things around sexual orientation and gender orientation, things around I guess the need to provide consent, for any activity, healthy internet use, things around sexting and assertiveness, for that um I think it's important to know about the reproductive system and also to learn that masturbation is a normal thing, to not necessarily teach that, but you know (Kelly, 44. Two children at primary school, 9 and 10 years of age).

In line with the sub-theme the world has changed, both Kelly and Julie's comments speak to the importance of education about digital technology and sexting (Dobson and Ringrose 2017) as well as gender and sexuality.

Other comments signalled the importance of taking a strengths-based approach to content inclusion. Kelly continued,

> Having a way that they know what's healthy and normal without feeling ashamed about it, also have some literacy around pornography and um and self-esteem built into the way people feel about their bodies and sexuality and relationships and dating, um yeah, I think all of those things are really very wide range of understanding (Kelly, 44. Two chlidren at primary school, 9 and 10 years of age).

Overall, responses within this theme pointed to a bygone discourse of shame and silence and signalled the desire to move forward from such discourses. Parents recognise the complex issues to be engaged with in RSE, including self-esteem, identity and emotion, as well as cognitive, social, biological, political and technological domains. Overall, parents in this study wanted children to have better opportunities for learning about RSE than had been available to themselves.

Who decides

With respect to who decides, the view was expressed that RSE was best developed in collaboration with subject matter experts:

> I imagine they've gone through quite a rigorous consultation process with content experts, you know developmental experts, to help make sure that what they're doing is appropriate (Kelly, 44. Two children at primary school, 9 and 10 years of age).

Informed by a developmental understanding of RSE, this parent expressed trust in the institution, suggesting that the school should decide on content. Some informants felt it was too tricky to consult with parents, who may have varied views, making consensus virtually impossible:

> I feel like maybe there shouldn't be too much discussion between the school and the parents. It will just end up being in a disaster, conflicting ideas or beliefs or whatever. So, I'm okay as long as I know what they are telling my kid and that it's probably the most important thing for me. I don't feel like I need any more input (Julie, 35. One child at primary school, 11 years of age).

Kelly, however, felt that parents should have direct input into the content. She raised the need for good communication with the school, so that parents could support their child's learning:

> I think an awareness that it's happening and an on-boarding of parents is going to be important as well as the parents being aware of what's being taught, so when the kids come home with questions, I can then link them back with the booklet or have a general sense of what they've been talking about at school, so that I can support whatever that learning is (Kelly, 44. Two children at primary school, 9 and 10 years of age).

Here, Kelly suggests that it is the school's responsibility to inform parents about content. A contrasting view was by Zara who suggested that schools should use surveys to elicit advice about content from parents:

> Yeah, they don't really do surveys at all. They don't give us anything . . . you know you could quickly do that (Zara, 37. One child at primary school, 9 years of age).

RSE in Practice

The third theme, RSE in practice, focused on the realities of RSE provision.

Actual RSE

When discussing the current content of school-based RSE, uncertainty was expressed about the focus adopted and specific topics covered.

> I think the primary focus is on . . . I think they do like the you know stranger danger, what parts of your body are like private, what to do in that sort of situation if you're confronted with, that and very brief reproductive health (Anna, 38. One child at primary school, 12 years of age).

> [It] seems to be more focused around childhood sexual abuse from what I can gather (Kelly, 44. Two children at primary school, 9 and 10 years of age).

In both of these quotes, uncertainty is expressed by the use of language such as 'I think', 'it seems' and 'from what I can gather'. The indicates a certain lack of clarity among parents about what is taught and how.

> My kids come home and talk to me about what they have learned and it's quite technical what they learned, like they learn all about the workings of the female anatomy, the male anatomy, how sex takes place from a mechanical perspective I guess (Julie, 35. One child at primary school, 11 years of age).

There is a sense of resignation here to the fact that children are taught RSE through a solely biological lens. This highlights a parallel sense of resignation to the likelihood that the school uses its power to promote abstinence.

> They do talk a little bit about Internet safety but it's more like don't go online because you might stumble across these very dark or very scary websites. I guess [its] authority, they love to talk about prohibiting children from doing things or prohibiting people from doing stuff so I think that's what they do. Don't go online, don't look at these rather than I don't know some other alternatives may be (Julie, 35. One child in primary school, 11 years of age).

Parental uncertainty

While expressing some understanding about what their children were learning in RSE, parents expressed uncertainty knowing what excatly the school was providing in response to the question, 'do you know if your child has or hasn't received RSE at school?' parents responded with comments, such as 'I don't know much' (Emily), 'I think they cover some things' (Kelly), 'I'm not aware' (Kelly), 'I don't think they do anything about that (RSE)' (Kelly), 'we had a brief conversation about it (RSE) at home' (Annna) and 'I don't know the specifics' (Zara). These responses suggest that these parents are unsure about the RSE topics covered, the way RSE is delivered, and when. One parent said that they knew an external organisation had been engaged to provide RSE, but did not know the details and had not followed up because of other demands on their time:

> In all fairness there's a good chance they have provided that information on a consent form somewhere and I just gone "oh sex ed consent blah blah blah and I have been busy" In honesty I don't read it (Julie, 35. One child in primary school, 11 years of age).

When discussing whether the school provided parents with enough information about what RSE at school would cover, interviewees suggested such information was lacking but were unsure how the information should be conveyed.

> In terms of sexual education, I think that they should . . . um . . . probably . um. I don't, I don't know what is appropriate but they could probably display or . um . er it's a very . er . I don't even know (Zara, 37. One child in primary school, 9 years of age).

> Yeah, like possibly sending home something that explained [RSE] (Anna, 38. One child at primary school, 12 years of age).

Parents also expressed uncertainty about the resources available to them: '[I'm] scared to look up this information on the Internet' (Julie), 'I don't know of any organisations or like online things' (Laura) and 'I'm not aware of any, any names off the top of my head' (Zara). Further uncertainty was apparent in relation to the content of the RSE their children received, points of responsibility and the resources and information available to them.

Conclusion

In this study, the responses of parents of children in primary schools in Queensland to three key themes 1) the need for RSE; 2) what RSE should look like; and 3) RSE in practice, are documented. While there are limitations to the study – the data set was small – study findings add to the growing body of research on parents' perspectives of RSE in primary school. They signal how parents were largely supportive of the work primary school teachers undertake to provide RSE. They also raise questions about the narrowness of concepts of RSE as implied by the Australian Currirulum and current state policy. In moving forwards, it is important for parents and schools to develop ways of engageing more collaboratively to support the provision of effective RSE to children and young people.

Notes

1. RSE is the term used in this paper to reflect the language found in the National Curriculum documents. We acknowledge a range of terms and epistemic positions are used internationally to reflect how sex, sexuality and relationships education is understood.
2. The term parent is used here to refer to a broad range of people who are legal guardians of children in their care.
3. Sex education and respectful relationships are terms used by state authorities to refer to different aspects of RSE.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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