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Real for me

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A new Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) curriculum will be mandatory in English schools from September 2021. At no other time has there been more pressure on schools and young people to be able to not only critically reflect on the curriculum but also create healthy relationships. The Real for Me project was commissioned by Derbyshire Education Improvement Services and supported by funding from Derbyshire Constabulary in 2019. Based on a practice-as-research methodology, the project used co-creation approaches, verbatim material, participation, and performance elements to engage 14–15-year olds in RSE in a practical way. The research considered how increased accessibility to pornography (available through smartphones) and violence and the sharing of sexualised imagery are having an impact on young people's relationships. The Child Sexual Exploitation UK Government Report (Newman, de Gruchy, 2017:19) identifies the need to educate children and young people around the unacceptability of (sexual) violence and abuse, and an apparent gap between children's and young people's conceptual understanding of sexual harm and the ability to identify this in their own lives.

Educational professionals report that young people can often quote the 'right answers' regarding consent but do not always apply them.

80 per cent of young people taking part in the survey said that watching pornography affected the way in which they had sex (Cowell & Smith, 2009). Furthermore, Bleakley et al. (2011b) found that exposure to sexualised materials was related to the likelihood of young people engaging in more sexualised behaviour because they perceived more social pressure to have sex.

(Horvath et al., 2013: 36)

National/international evidence reports that abuse and violence in young people’s relationships is substantial:

- Half of all young people reported emotional abuse
A third of adolescent girls and a quarter of boys reported sexual violence through pressure or physical force (Barter, Stanley, 2017).

University of Lancashire’s Sexual Harassment and Violence in Schools (Barter, Stanley, 2017) reported 41% of girls aged 14 to 17 had experienced some form of sexual violence from their partner. Indeed, researchers noted that the normalisation of sexual harassment and abuse makes it less likely that victims will identify violent behaviour as abusive.

Over the last 30 years applied drama practitioners in the UK have used drama extensively to deliver sex and relationship education (SRE), initially in response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic and then subsequently to address high levels of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, according to figures reported in the UK during the 1990s and early 2000s. Indoor Fireworks (Taylor: 1990), a production with which I was involved, explored the prejudices and safer sex practices surrounding HIV transmission. Unfortunately, it fell foul of Clause 28 legislation at the time, and the production was banned from going into schools by the local authority (Figure 39.1).

Although Clause 28 was eventually removed from the statute books in 2001, teenage pregnancy figures continued to rise, and health authorities clamoured to commission theatre in education projects to address these issues in schools. As a consequence of this investment, over the following decade, conception figures fell by 50%, achieved partly by combining improved SRE work delivered by teachers supported by theatre productions, and also through the availability of the contraceptive pill and ‘morning-after’ pill without parental approval (Figure 39.2).³
However, results from our baseline audit in 2019 reported that 72% of young people were either not receiving any RSE or were requesting more lessons. Horvath et al.’s 2013 report corroborated this:

Children and young people want more education and opportunity to discuss sex and relationships [whilst] many parents feel poorly equipped to help their children.

But it is also the opportunity for young people’s voices to contribute to the design and content of RSE programmes of work that is widely recognised as best practice (FPA and Brook 2017, DfE Draft Curriculum 2018). Therefore, the opportunity to use verbatim material, young people’s voices, within Real for Me provided another valuable element. Using theatre and participatory drama gives young people the opportunity to engage critically and empathetically with the complexities of the relationships presented. They are encouraged to actively respond to real-life scenarios and to reflect and identify the consequences of unhealthy behaviour in a safe space.

The process of using drama as a research structure enabled professional researchers/actors/workshop facilitators to work with young people to obtain their ideas to co-create the workshop. Interviews were recorded, and these verbatim accounts, conducted by applied theatre undergraduates at University of Derby, were then transcribed so that we could identify themes. The research process adhered to ethical practices, with all young people’s identities anonymised. The verbatim material was then used to create Real for Me, which toured to over 300 young people in secondary schools in the city of Derby. Participants completed questionnaires before and after workshops, enabling us to draw together statistical evidence and thematically analyse qualitative data.

During the workshops the actors spoke the verbatim material as the recorded voices were played through headphones. This is commonly known as headphone-verbatim theatre (Figure 39.3).

Verbatim, within the context of delivering RSE, provides the opportunity for young people to hear real stories and engage with a breadth of experiences which in themselves...
contribute to greater empathy and understanding. In Abbey Wright’s production *Why Is the Sky Blue?* (2018), hundreds of young people were interviewed about the addictive nature of pornography and their experiences. Wright’s Tackroom Theatre Company rehearsed young people aged between 6 and 22 to perform headphone-verbatim theatre to community audiences in London. However, the production only had a short run and the work was never widely disseminated. When working in schools we know that our audiences are diverse and democratic, and the impact in relation to behavioural change can be significant. Indeed, young people’s responses to the verbatim material provided much-needed credibility, with comments such as: ‘It makes me think the workshop is more reliable as it is from real students’ (2019). By placing young people’s voices at the heart of the piece through the use of verbatim material, Real for Me offers a rich experience combining critical pedagogy with a unique aesthetic.

Adams (2013) proposes that Paulo Freire’s dialogic learning supports the use of theatre contributing to development of young people’s critical thinking skills. Inherent in this proposition is the necessity to recognise that while there is no one way for teaching and learning to be developed, the empowerment of young people in the educative experience is critical. This is particularly important within RSE. Indeed, research highlights that when young people are able to contribute to the design and delivery of RSE, the benefits and impacts increase significantly (Adams, 2013). Adams positions educational theatre as an example of being able to critically engage pupils in an educational experience that involves the whole person through the use of emotion/empathy, symbolism/metaphor/visual, and participation/kinaesthetic learning. The process of participation embraces the possibility of creative and dialogic learning, where everyone can learn equally and engage critically, creating a genuine process of enquiry. The applied drama facilitator is also not in a hierarchical relationship, thus enabling dialogue and not monologues. The verbatim material was intercut with an overarching fictional narrative, where characters were pressured into sharing sexually explicit images. Participants engaged directly with the characters through hot seating, taking on the roles themselves, considering the consequences of sharing sexualised imagery and changing the outcome. The drama processes provided opportunities for young people to create empathy with the characters and see behaviours from a different perspective. As one young person said, it ‘makes you be in their shoes and show how they are feeling inside’
(2019). Indeed, 88% of young people reported that the use of drama helped them to understand the complexities and consequences of accessing pornography and sharing sexualised images.

The use of verbatim material also ensured that LGBTQ issues were introduced holistically, because these were the concerns of young people. Participants listened intently and were visibly sitting further forward in their chairs when verbatim accounts of LGBTQ experiences were shared:

‘There is a kid in my year and he was watching gay porn and his friends found it on his phone and showed everyone in the whole school and outed him and the kid has not spoken to anybody since, for a whole year and a half. He sits in my history class, he used to sit right next to me and now he sits on the other side of the room by himself, he hasn’t spoken and I think people need to respect that as well’ (2019)

Young people wanted to talk about the prejudicial attitudes that exist in schools, and the verbatim material facilitated this. In response young people commented:

‘I thought that I knew a lot but I don’t.’

‘It needs to be talked about more as it is obviously affecting people.’

The development of these skills contributed to young people being able to consider the impact and addictive consequences of graphic sexual imagery, consent, social media bullying, and the risks of being groomed by others.

Projects like Real for Me demonstrate that young people urgently need high-quality RSE that supports the development of critical thinking skills alongside building self-esteem. The additional potential for online grooming and isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic highlights yet further the demand for RSE to be delivered through the use of drama, thus enabling young people to discuss openly and safely what is real and right for them.

Notes
1 Conception figures for under-18-year-olds in the UK in 1971–2007 were between 46 and 54.9 per 100,000 of population. After 2007 there is a steady decline. Retrieved from: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/conceptionandfertilityrates/bulletins/conceptionstatistics/2016#lowest-under-18-conception-rate-since-comparable-statistics-were-first-produced.
2 Clause 28 was introduced by the Conservative Government in 1986 banning the representation of same-sex relationships as being ‘normal’. This included in any reading materials, novels, theatre, or teaching materials.
4 300 young people participated, 263 completed questionnaires (72%) young people said they were not receiving any RSE lessons in school

References


