

The Existence of a Hidden Curriculum in Sex and Relationships Education in Secondary Schools

Bethany Smith, University of East Anglia

Abstract

This paper investigates the extent and impact of the hidden curriculum in Sex and Relationships Education (SRE). The article explores evidence surrounding the existence of a hidden curriculum through evaluating current conceptual research and government policy. Furthermore, the paper considers possible improvements, to enhance the content and delivery of SRE and challenge negative and damaging aspects of the hidden curriculum. Throughout the paper, significance is placed on the importance of youth voice, to ensure young people receive the information and advice they require. The article will argue that a hidden curriculum does exist in SRE, perpetuating the marginalisation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT+) students and the entrenchment of gender roles.

Introduction

Sex and relationships education (SRE) in secondary schools has been identified as crucial for providing young people with accurate and age appropriate information in order to rectify the unreliable information young people gain from media, friends and the internet (Archard, 2003). However, current SRE can contain hidden messages of inequality and the marginalisation of minority groups (Chilisa, 2006; Epstein et al., 2003; Kehily, 2002a). To this end the paper will explore the extent to which a hidden curriculum exists in SRE in secondary schools. The paper will first outline current policy on SRE before moving on to consider why SRE is such an integral aspect of the curriculum and the need for further research to facilitate necessary improvements. The article will then assess the evidence supporting the existence of a hidden curriculum in SRE, using both conceptual research and young people's voices. Furthermore, the paper will consider possible improvements to the formal curriculum, with a view to enhancing the content and delivery of SRE, and challenging the negative attitudes and stereotypes contained in the hidden curriculum. Finally, the paper will briefly discuss the ethical issues surrounding SRE and the need for further research in this area. This paper will argue a hidden curriculum does exist in SRE, entrenching gender roles and marginalising lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT+) students (Epstein et al., 2003; Kehily, 2002a). Furthermore, the paper will suggest that considerable improvements are necessary to ensure SRE can meet the needs of all young people (Ofsted, 2012).

Current Policy

To evaluate the extent to which a hidden curriculum exists in SRE, the current policy and curriculum surrounding SRE will be outlined. The Education Act, 1996, states the only compulsory topics in SRE are biological; for example reproduction and sexual health, including sexually transmitted diseases (Family Planning Association,

2011). Although further guidance, issued in 2000, advised the inclusion of emotional aspects of SRE, including relationships, the policy may be socially exclusive due to a focus upon the importance of marriage as the foundation of a strong family unit (Hilton, 2009; Formby, 2011). Furthermore, responsibility for SRE remains with head teachers and governors; consequently schools can 'opt out' of having a sex education programme (DofE, 2000). Therefore, a key problem regarding SRE may be that it remains a non-statutory subject and, therefore, access can be both unequal and inconsistent (UK Youth Parliament, 2007). Since 2000, little additional guidance has been issued; Guidance on Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE), issued in 2013, defined SRE as an important component of PSHE, however gave little practical guidance on content, delivery or training (DofE, 2013). It is evident, therefore, that current SRE topics could be too narrow and inconsistently delivered to provide all young people with adequate information (Allen, 2005).

Despite a lack of updated policy, SRE could be significant in dispelling any misleading and inaccurate information young people gain from the media and internet (Archard, 2003; Epstein, 2003; Formby, 2011; Girl Guiding UK, 2014). Furthermore, improved, and therefore diverse, SRE could result in students adopting more tolerant attitudes, which may present a challenge to existing gender stereotypes and homophobia (Epstein et al., 2003). This is supported by Girl Guiding UK who advocate SRE is every girl's right in order to give young women the power and information to challenge everyday sexism and be critical of gender relations (Girl Guiding UK, 2014). Moreover, a lack of school sex education could result in young people gaining information from the media or internet (Archard, 2003). This information could have a negative influence in shaping young people's attitudes and identities due to the invisibility of LGBT+ issues and gender norms being regularly reinforced (Archard, 2003; Formby, 2011). Furthermore, due to recent government legislation, schools have an obligation to reduce, and potentially remove, discrimination on any grounds and therefore SRE should meet the needs of all students, without any hidden messages of inequality (Equality Act 2006; 2010). Several key issues have been identified with current SRE, including the limited content, inconsistent delivery, silence regarding LGBT+ issues and the reproduction of gender roles (Buck and Parrotta, 2014; Chilisa, 2006; Epstein, 2003; Kehily, 2002b; Ofsted, 2012; UK Youth Parliament, 2007). Moreover, it has been argued that current 'sex education is closely tied to sexuality and gender inequalities', which could be reinforced through students adopting the attitudes and stereotypes presented through the hidden curriculum (Chilisa, 2006, 250; Kehily, 2002a).

The Hidden Curriculum

The hidden curriculum can be defined as 'everything that a learner learns above and beyond the official or planned curriculum' (Murphy, Mufti and Kossem, 2009, 164). This unofficial learning can include behaviours and values transmitted through how the teaching is delivered (Murphy, Mufti and Kossem, 2009). Moreover, the hidden curriculum could play a role in reproducing negative beliefs about gender roles (Skelton and Francis, 2009). For example, reading books may depict males as actively having careers whilst females, in the role of housewife or mother, are portrayed as passive (Meigham and Siraj-Blatchford, 2003). In relation to attitudes towards sexuality and gender roles the hidden curriculum was defined by Epstein, 2003 as:

The attitudes... of students as well as those embedded in the taught curriculum... inevitably includes the presumption of normative versions of heterosexuality (Epstein, 2003, 123).

The focus of the paper is on the hidden curriculum. But it will be suggested that in order to reduce the transmission of negative and less progressive values through the hidden curriculum, the formal and planned curriculum itself needs to be more diverse and inclusive.

Methodology

To conduct research into the existence of a hidden curriculum in SRE existing literature including peer reviewed journals, books and government policy was reviewed and critically examined. Literature was located and selected using key word searches including 'sex education and gender', 'sexuality and sex education' and 'sex and relationships education'. Due to the contemporary and progressive nature of the topics being investigated and changes to government policy, literature published before 1995 was not included. Conceptual literature was investigated through researching the ideology and content of the hidden curriculum and the impact of the hidden curriculum on perceptions of gender roles and the concept of heteronormativity. Finally, conceptual literature was cross referenced with research on student views and experiences of SRE to support the proposed content of the hidden curriculum. From this research it became apparent that a hidden curriculum does exist in SRE. Furthermore, this hidden curriculum could promote heterosexual relations, marginalise individuals who identify as LGBT+, and perpetuate existing gender roles and expectations.

Perpetuation of Gender Roles and Stereotypes

SRE can contribute to the embedding of existing gender roles and power dynamics (Harrison, 2000). In particular, the content of SRE lessons has been identified as a key factor in reinforcing current power dynamics with males as dominant and females as passive (Formby, 2011). For example, when discussing sex and relationships, women are frequently portrayed as passive or submissive and as wives and mothers. As a result, women are often placed in an inferior position to men (Measor et al., 2000). Moreover, it has been proposed that the reticence surrounding female sexual pleasure reinforces the view that women's needs are second to, and therefore inferior to, men's needs (Chilisa, 2006; Formby, 2011; Strange et al., 2003). This silence is evidenced through the traditional version of sex being portrayed as the man seeking physical pleasure and the woman as the provider of pleasure (Harrison, 2000). This depiction could place women in a lower position with less right to pleasure, consequently supporting traditional power dynamics (Hirst, 2013). The language used in the depiction of sex, moreover, can further reinforce traditional gender roles; in some schools sex is portrayed as 'something done to a woman by a man' (Skelton and Francis, 2009, 65). As a result, women's subservient position may be exacerbated (Skelton and Francis, 2009). In addition, discussion around other sexual acts, for example oral sex, could further perpetuate this power dynamic; males are regularly portrayed as the dominant receiver of oral sex and women as the passive provider of pleasure (Measor et al., 2000). In addition to the discussion of sexual acts, the silence surrounding women's sexual pleasure may be furthered through masturbation being presented as a

distinctly male activity (Measor et al., 2000). As a result, this paper strongly argues that current SRE reinforces existing power dynamics, evidenced through research into discussion of sexual acts and the reticence regarding women's sexual pleasure. Although sexual acts are frequently discussed in SRE lessons, issues of rape and consent are rarely examined, suggesting sex is a man's right and women have no choice of partner (Buck and Parotta, 2014). Therefore, women's rights need to be discussed in SRE, their right, for example, to choose partners and say no (Hilton, 2009). Moreover, it should be noted that this issue is less frequently discussed in literature surrounding SRE. Consequently it can be tentatively suggested that the issue of consent may be overlooked in SRE research.

The hidden curriculum in SRE includes not only what is taught, but also the impact and significance of what is not taught (Kehily, 2002a). A lack of sufficient sex education may result in young people resorting to pornography for details about sexual acts. 39 out of 65 students asked said they had used pornography to gain information about sex (Measor et al., 2000). As viewing pornography can reinforce gender norms and strengthen the view of women as sexual objects, the lack of detail in SRE can be linked to the reproduction of gender inequalities and sexist attitudes (Allen, 2005; Hovarth et al., 2013; Hald et al., 2013). As a result of the expectations placed on women from the influence of pornography and the media, SRE should empower young women to resist and challenge these pressures (Buck and Parotta, 2014; Girl Guiding UK, 2014).

A further consideration regarding the hidden curriculum in SRE is the extent to which classroom conduct reinforces gender stereotypes and the view of women as sexual objects (Buck and Parotta, 2014). In SRE lessons, frequent instances of boys using negative and derogatory labels to describe and objectify women are rarely challenged by teachers (Buck and Parotta, 2014). Males using slang terms to describe female bodies and sexual organs can create shame surrounding menstruation and may result in girls feeling ashamed of their bodies (Harrison, 2000). In addition, negative labels and attitudes can diminish girls' sexual self-confidence, and could cause them to consider ways in which they might change themselves to meet male expectations. Therefore, by not challenging the instances of negative male labelling of women, male dominance may be reaffirmed and gender power dynamics further reinforced (Kehily, 2002b).

Research on students' opinions of SRE supports this argument. Young people report males having the power to label girls purely on their appearance, evidenced through young girls' bodies being perceived and criticised from the male perspective, including being ranked on their relative attractiveness (Measor et al., 2000). This behaviour can support the idea that femininity is linked to and resides in attractiveness, thus reinforcing the idea that women should be judged on appearance rather than ability (Measor et al., 2000). As a result, the attitude that women should be viewed as sexual objects is reinforced (Kehily, 2002b). Classroom behaviour could be a central element of the hidden curriculum in SRE, potentially confirming existing gender norms and power dynamics.

Teacher expectations can also perpetuate gender expectations (Mellor and Epstein, 2006). For example, teachers often classify boys as active or disruptive, whereas girls are viewed as quiet or calm (Mellor and Epstein, 2006). This distinction can

reinforce traditional power dynamics, male as dominant and women as subservient (Mellor and Epstein, 2006). Moreover, teachers' perceptions of girls as innocent and boys as having desires might strengthen the concept of sex as a principally male activity pursued for male pleasure (Buck and Parotta, 2014). As a result both student and teacher expectations and labels could contribute to the reinforcement of existing power dynamics.

Exclusion of LGBT+ issues and individuals

The first section of the paper has discussed the existence of a hidden curriculum in SRE in relation to the perpetuation of gender norms and stereotypes. The paper will now move on to evaluate to what extent heteronormative attitudes result in LGBT+ issues being excluded.

There is a presumption and normalisation of heterosexuality in both government policy and practice (Kehily, 2002b; Halstead and Reiss, 2003). For example, the Learning and Skills Act 2002 states SRE must be presented with 'due consideration to the importance of marriage and family life' (Hilton, 2009, 238). Consequently, SRE can be exclusively focussed on 'heterosexually imagined futures', with little or no allowance for diversity (Epstein et al., 2003, 53). Silence regarding same sex relationships could be linked to Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 which states that local governments should not promote homosexual relationships. Although the act did not apply to schools, this clause may have created anxiety for teachers regarding how to discuss LGBT+ issues in the classroom (Kehily, 2002a; Measor, 2000). Despite being repealed in 2000 by the Learning and Skills Act, the legacy of this section may still discourage teachers from discussing homosexuality today (Epstein et al., 2003). Government policy might promote the traditional, heterosexual family (Halstead and Reiss, 2003).

In accordance with government policy, in SRE lessons heterosexuality is often the dominant culture, through the depiction, for example, of the traditional family as man, wife and children (Halstead and Reiss, 2003; Formby, 2011). This depiction may not only be socially exclusive of modern families, but could also reinforce the normalisation of heterosexuality and therefore the marginalisation of LGBT+ individuals (Halstead and Reiss, 2003). Moreover, through the depiction of penetrative sex as 'normal' or 'real sex' and the importance placed on marriage, heteronormativity may be portrayed as the inevitable or default position (Mellor and Epstein, 2006). Therefore, SRE can often promote marriage as superior to all other relationships (Formby, 2011). It has been argued that same sex relationships are 'demonized and rendered virtually unspeakable' in SRE lessons and more generally in schools (Mellor and Epstein, 2006, 383). Furthermore the normalisation of heteronormative relationships could be further reinforced through teachers in heterosexual relations discussing their home lives, whereas teachers in same sex relationships may be less likely to do so (Mellor and Epstein, 2006). Subsequently, there is strong evidence to suggest a hidden curriculum exists in SRE which promotes heterosexuality and thus marginalises LGBT+ young people.

As a direct result of the promotion of heterosexual relationships, LGBT+ issues may be largely excluded from SRE lessons, and the needs of LGBT+ youth neglected (Allen, 2005; Buck and Parotta, 2014; Measor, 2000). For example, in a small scale

study in 2011, no sexual health information was provided for lesbian or bisexual female students (Formby, 2011). Moreover, details of LGBT+ centres which could have provided further information were not released. Subsequently, 26% of students asked wrongly believed you could not transmit sexual infections in a female same-sex relationship (Formby, 2011). Although this was a small scale study and thus not generalisable, it is supported by a Stonewall survey which found only one in five students (22 per cent) reported discussing gay people or their relationships in SRE (Stonewall, 2012). In addition, largely cis-women and cis-men are represented, potentially, excluding trans-identifying youth (Mearor, 2000). This is supported by a Youth Chances study in which 7,000 young people were questioned and 94% were found to have learnt nothing about trans issues (Youth Chances, 2014). Therefore, there is clear evidence to support the absence of information regarding LGBT+ issues in SRE (Formby, 2011, Stonewall, 2012). A fully inclusive curriculum, which is critical of heteronormativity, could help combat homophobia (Buck and Parotta, 2014; Epstein et al., 2003; Warwick and Aggleton, 2014). Moreover, student views of SRE demonstrate young people want LGBT+ issues to be included in SRE as they believe inclusion could reduce homophobia and increase acceptance and peer support (Allen, 2005; Mearor, 2000).

It is evident, therefore, that this paper has highlighted the existence of a hidden curriculum in SRE regarding the exclusion of LGBT+ issues. The paper will now briefly discuss the impact of this neglect of LGBT+ needs. The exclusion of LGBT+ issues could create a prevailing homophobic atmosphere (Halstead and Reiss, 2003; Mearor et al., 2000). For example, there may be frequent instances of unchallenged, homophobic language, particularly in SRE lessons attempting to deal with LGBT+ issues (Epstein et al., 2003; Kehily, 2002a and 2002b; Ofsted, 2012). 96% of LGBT+ pupils have reported experiencing homophobic language on a regular basis (Stonewall, 2012). As a result of the homophobia and bullying, LGBT+ individuals can feel alienated and 'othered', denied a sense of belonging (Epstein et al., 2003; Kehily, 2002a; Stonewall, 2012). This isolation is further evidenced through more than half (54 per cent) of lesbian, gay and bisexual pupils feeling excluded from friendship groups (Stonewall 2012). Therefore, there is evidence to support the detrimental impact of the exclusion of LGBT+ issues and the need to challenge prejudices and homophobia through more inclusive and diverse SRE (Buck and Parotta, 2014; Epstein et al., 2003).

To this end, the paper has demonstrated the existence of a hidden curriculum in SRE which reinforces dominant heteronormative attitudes (Mellor and Epstein, 2006). The official content of SRE lessons, teachers and classroom behaviour could all contribute to reinforcing the damaging values of inequality, sexism and homophobia through the hidden curriculum (Epstein et al., 2003; Skelton and Francis, 2009). Despite current messages of inequality, the paper has suggested SRE should be a safe space to discuss existing societal pressures and values, in order for young people to have greater awareness of inequalities and the confidence to challenge prejudices (Girl Guiding UK, 2014; Hilton, 2009; Mearor et al., 2000). However, the paper proposes significant improvements are necessary for discrimination and inequality to be challenged (Kehily, 2002b; Mellor and Epstein, 2006; Skelton and Francis, 2009).

Improvements to theory and practice

To this end, the next section of the paper will discuss possible improvements to the formal SRE curriculum for the purpose of challenging less progressive attitudes currently reinforced through the hidden curriculum. The paper will first consider theoretical improvements, for example the need for an updated and clear government policy, then move on to explore more practical issues of training and content. The section will conclude by exploring best practice and alternate approaches to SRE, including sex positivity and sexuality education.

In order for significant improvement regarding the practice of SRE, a clear and updated government policy may be necessary (Measor 2000; Ofsted 2012). This policy should integrate the views and suggestions of young people in relation to their experiences and recommendations for SRE, to ensure the updated official curriculum is both age appropriate and relevant to the needs of young people (Halstead and Reiss, 2003; Measor et al., 2000).

As previously discussed, there is evidence to suggest LGBT+ issues are currently excluded from SRE (Kehily, 2002b). A key improvement has been identified as a clear acceptance of, and support for, homosexual relationships being included in government policy (Allen, 2005; Blake, 2002; UK Youth Parliament, 2007). Furthermore, future legislation could take steps to resolve contradictions in current policy regarding promoting marriage and reproduction, yet not marginalising same-sex relationships (Epstein et al., 2003). In addition, although Section 28 has been repealed, concerns regarding the clause may need to be clearly addressed to reduce teachers' anxieties when discussing LGBT+ issues (Epstein et al., 2003; Measor et al., 2000). Future policies should specifically include the need for discussion surrounding trans issues in order to ensure SRE meets the needs of all young people (Blake et al., 2014). Conversely, including discourse on LGBT+ relationships may increase homophobia, since discussing a sensitive issue can cause controversies to arise (Halstead and Reiss, 2003). However, research into young people's views suggests students support the inclusion of LGBT+ issues and homophobia in SRE, since this might help dispel negative attitudes (Allen, 2005; Measor, 2000; UK Youth Parliament, 2007).

In addition to inclusion of LGBT+ issues, there is strong support for new legislation to ensure SRE is a platform for challenging gender norms and power dynamics (Epstein et al., 2003; Girl Guiding UK, 2014). In order to facilitate the discussion of gender relations, SRE could be renamed as Relationships and Sex Education. This might refocus attention, and teaching time, on relationships, choices and rights (Hovarth et al., 2013). Therefore, for damaging attitudes perpetuated through the hidden curriculum in SRE to be challenged, future policies must ensure the foundations are laid in the official curriculum for gender roles to be examined and LGBT+ issues to be addressed in SRE lessons.

In addition to increasing the range of topics covered in SRE, so that stereotypes and prejudices might be challenged, SRE should be a compulsory subject (Hilton, 2009; UK Youth Parliament, 2007). It could underpin positive attitudes towards acceptance and diversity. If schools were able opt out of SRE lessons some young people's attitudes would remain unchallenged (Measor, 2000; Hilton, 2009). Therefore, rather than SRE being an addition to the curriculum, students and academics propose that

it should be a statutory subject with its teaching hours increased throughout secondary education (Allen, 2005).

Regardless of the place of SRE within the curriculum, without effective teacher training SRE lessons may not improve, as teachers can find discussing sexualities challenging (Mellor and Epstein, 2006; Ofsted, 2012). In addition, teachers can feel pressure from the media, fearing they might be accused of sexualising children (Mellor and Epstein, 2006). It is reported that only 3% of teachers feel adequately trained to deliver SRE (Martinez and Emmerson, 2008). Regular and comprehensive training would enable teachers to effectively manage disruptive, homophobic or sexist behaviour, potentially creating an accepting and supportive atmosphere in which sensitive issues might be discussed (Epstein, 2003; Halstead, 2003; Ofsted 2012; Potter, 2009), including a variety of relationships and the rights of women (Allen, 2005; Hilton, 2009; Kehily, 2002b; Measor, 2000). Moreover, in order to improve young people's sexual self-esteem, there could be a greater focus on decreasing shame and embarrassment around sexuality and sexual activity (Halstead and Reiss, 2003). Therefore, improved training is necessary for a safe space to be created in which difficult issues can be discussed.

Further to additional teacher training, improved resources may be necessary to challenge existing stereotypes and damaging attitudes. For example, current diagrams and pictures used in SRE lessons can display women in almost exclusively subservient positions (Hirst, 2009). To challenge existing gender stereotypes, and include LGBT+ issues, new resources are necessary (Hirst, 2009; Harrison, 2000).

Alternate Approaches to SRE

In addition to improved teacher training and updated resources, alternate approaches to the delivery of SRE could reduce homophobia and create a platform on which to discuss gender relations. SRE should be centred on teacher-facilitated, student discussion and interaction, as distinct from a more traditional didactic teacher led approach (Harrison, 2000). However, there are many suggestions regarding how best to approach these discussions.

One approach could be moving towards sexuality education, using theories and literature to enhance young people's understanding of sexuality. This approach could result in SRE becoming more inclusive and diverse (Mellor and Epstein, 2006; Skelton and Francis, 2009) facilitating a challenge to traditional attitudes to LGBT+ issues and gender roles (Epstein et al., 2003). Moreover, discussion surrounding power dynamics and relationships could be extended to a range of subjects, in order to make the themes relevant to different aspects of daily life and allow a theoretical critique of society (Mellor and Epstein, 2006). For example, Samanya drama has created an SRE programme to explore boundaries, relationships and access to sexual health advice and support through the use of drama techniques (Sex Education Forum, 2014b). Moreover, Tender Education Theatre developed a programme based around the exploration of abuse, consent and rape, topics which can be omitted from school SRE programmes (Sex Education Forum, 2011). This programme evaluation reported 90% of students involved felt they had learnt something from the programme (Sex Education Forum, 2011). There is no doubt that positive steps to include SRE in the wider curriculum are being taken, but these

projects are largely aimed at Pupil Referral Units, and therefore need to be extended to all schools if widespread change is to be effected.

In contrast, approaching SRE as a discussion based on pleasure could improve gender equality and engage LGBT+ students (Hirst, 2013). Through viewing sex as a potentially pleasurable activity for all genders, the discussion of rights could be facilitated, as well as discussion about safety and sexual health and the importance of these issues for all young people (Hirst, 2013). Discussing sex as a pleasurable activity could result in young people taking greater responsibility for their own sexual choices and health, through reinforcing safety and choice as a right of all young people (Hirst, 2013). Although research into alternative approaches to SRE is not widely developed, it can be tentatively suggested that a combination of discussing sexuality across the curriculum and adopting a more positive attitude to sex and sexuality could help to address the inequalities currently reinforced through SRE.

Ethical Considerations

Despite the emergence of new approaches to SRE and support for the introduction of an updated government policy, potential obstacles to progress have been identified (Halstead, 2005; Sanjakdar, 2013; Van Dijk and Van Driel, 2007). Religious values could limit advancements regarding improved SRE, due to conflict over discussion of sexuality, teaching of homosexuality and challenging gender norms (Halstead and Reiss, 2003; Smerecnik et al., 2010). For instance, accepting and teaching sexual differences may be challenging for teachers, causing them to omit sensitive topics from SRE lessons (Sanjakdar, 2013). Moreover, including LGBT+ issues and challenging gender norms may cause conflict with religious values for both teachers and pupils (Sanjakdar, 2013).

There is much discussion surrounding how SRE should be taught to Muslim students without causing conflict with Islamic teachings (Halstead, 2005). As Islamic teachings have specific attitudes and values regarding marriage and family life, Muslims may have the right not to encounter the topic of homosexuality in SRE lessons (Halstead, 1997). However, Muslim LGBT+ youth, friends and peers could need support, and SRE could be an opportunity to increase awareness and acceptance and challenge homophobia (Halstead and Reiss, 2003; Van Dijk and Van Driel, 2007). But it is reported that Muslim youth are reluctant to discuss sexuality and, therefore, are more likely to not attend compulsory SRE lessons (Smerecnik et al., 2010). However, some studies suggest that religious groups and leaders do want to be more involved in the delivery of SRE in schools and, therefore, potential partnerships could be developed to foster positive relationships and deliver appropriate, sensitive multi-cultural SRE (Thurrock Council, 2010).

Another potential barrier to compulsory SRE is that academies and free schools are not obliged to provide SRE in line with the national curriculum (Long, 2014). However, greater freedom regarding SRE could facilitate the development of a policy that reflects the school's values and beliefs through liaising with religious leaders, parents and students (Sex Education Forum, 2014; Smerecnik et al., 2010). Such a policy would need to reflect the school's obligation to the wider inclusion agenda and secretary of state guidance on SRE, and therefore could not discriminate against any

protected characteristic (Equality Act, 2010; Long, 2014; Sex Education Forum, 2014).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has evaluated the extent, and impact, of the hidden curriculum in SRE lessons. The paper has demonstrated the frequent normalisation of heterosexual relationships and the extent to which the needs of LGBT+ individuals may be overlooked. Furthermore, the paper has suggested that the exclusion of LGBT+ issues can contribute to the creation of a homophobic atmosphere in schools, furthered through unchallenged homophobic language and bullying (Epstein et al., 2003). Moreover, the paper has evaluated the extent to which current SRE reinforces gender inequalities, considering classroom conduct, language and teacher expectations (Kehily, 2002b). The paper has concluded that SRE can contribute to the promotion of existing power dynamics and sexist attitudes through poor presentation of information and underlying stereotypes (Mellor and Epstein, 2006). In addition, the paper has considered possible improvements to the official curriculum in order to challenge less progressive attitudes currently reinforced through the hidden curriculum. In particular, a clear, diverse and updated government policy, reflecting the recommendations of academics and young people has been identified as essential (Allen, 2005; Ofsted, 2012). Throughout the paper, the need for further research into the area has been indicated, particularly regarding the issues of rape and consent, ethical considerations and the obligations of academics.

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