



Ep.2 Let's Go Further

Sex education – some find it uncomfortable, others find it controversial. But Dougie Boyd is here to make the case that it's essential.

Dougie is Director of Education and Wellbeing at Brook, a charity that supports people with their sexual health and wellbeing. In this episode, he and Joe discuss relationships and sexual health education (RSE) – something that was only made mandatory in schools in September 2020.

Dougie explains the importance of RSE for young people, not only in school but in further education too. He also makes recommendations for policymakers on how we can change the conversation around RSE and support further education providers to deliver this subject effectively.

So, let's talk about sex, relationships and education.

Transcript

Joe Mcloughlin 0:02

Hello, and welcome to Series Two of Let's Go Further, a podcast from the Skills and Education Group that challenges the way we think about skills and education. I'm Joe Mcloughlin, Foundation Manager at the Group, and in this series, I'm speaking to people from inside and outside the education sector about equity, diversity and inclusion. In this episode, we're talking about relationships and sex advice in education. And joining me is Dougie Boyd, Director of Education and Wellbeing at Brook, a charity that supports people with their sexual health and wellbeing. So Dougie, relationships and sexual health education was only made a statutory requirement for schools - that's up to the age of 16 - in September 2020, can you tell us a little bit about why that was, why it took so long perhaps?

Dougie Boyd 0:45

There was a real reluctance both by successive governments, by schools and colleges themselves, by teachers, as a result of social context, as a result of history, as a result of some very specific pieces of legislation, such as Section 28, all of which contributed to a real reluctance to engage with the subject on any level. And I think from a societal perspective, we have been and are still reluctant to engage with the whole topic of young people and sex and relationships, it's always been a really, really difficult thing for adults to grasp that children and young people are interested in sex and education and need education on those topics from a fairly early age, in order to make sense of the world around them

and their place in the world, and perhaps the different relationships that they see enacted in their day to day lives. And I think it's also important to remember that the introduction of mandatory RSE in 2020 wasn't as a result of any specific government position in saying, we want to bring this legislation to Parliament to introduce mandatory RSE, it was actually kind of piggybacked on to the end of some health and safety legislation, and health and safety changes. So there was never really one defining moment, one specific government, one specific cohort of leaders within the Department for Education, who really spearheaded the introduction of mandatory RSE, it was a series of kind of lucky coincidences. So in general, a real reluctance for people to engage with the idea of young people needing to be educated and to learn about sex and relationships education. I also think that certainly successive governments from the coalition government onwards who have put real emphasis on rote learning on kind of very factual based curriculums, there's kind of been a reluctance to engage with some of the abstract subjects. And you know, relationships education is a very abstract subject. So the final reason that it took so long is that Ofsted had very little to say about sex and relationships education prior to September 2020. So there wasn't really any mechanism within government within Ofsted, that was driving this change. It was third sector organisations like Brook like SEF, like Stonewall, who were really trying to drive this change. So it's been a very long time coming. And of course, given the current climate and the current situation, mandatory RSE is looking more and more precarious than ever. Yes, it wasn't a smooth journey.

Joe Mcloughlin 3:31

So just recognising that that precarity, then, since it has been made compulsory for the last sort of two and a half years, almost at this point, what are some of the benefits you've seen kind of with young people with learners?

Dougie Boyd 3:42

It's really important to acknowledge that two and a half years is not enough time to embed a whole new statutory curriculum subject and to get conclusive learning and conclusive data from it. Although that may sound a little bit counterintuitive that I'm saying that from a Brook perspective, it's that we are operating in the current climate where lots of people are making lots of conclusions about what mandatory RSE does and doesn't do, and actually two and a half years, particularly given that it was introduced during the pandemic, particularly given that the amount of money that was supposed to be ringfenced for schools, in order to enable them to upskill their teachers to be able to teach them, that money wasn't forthcoming from the government, I think we should be careful about drawing very firm conclusions, that this is what it's done. From a Brook perspective, we are aware that when young people have access to really good Sex and Relationships Education, we see them accessing the full range of services that are

available to them. So very often in Brook, we will run education, health promotion, outreach sessions in schools. And we will also have a clinical provision within the local geographic area. And what we see where we have really good RSE in schools, whether it's delivered by organisations like Brook or delivered by schools themselves, is that we see young people understanding what they need to do to take care of themselves what they need to do to take care of their sexual health, and how to access sexual health services. And I think we do have a real hang-up in this country about young people accessing sexual health services. Well, in fact, not just young people. But one of the things we have to remember is that, that taking care of your sexual health is an absolutely appropriate part of your lifelong healthcare journey. And we want to encourage everybody to take care of their sexual health. And so what we see when we see really good really intelligent, embedded RSE, is that we see young people prepared to take care of their sexual health, we see them more prepared to attend clinics, when they need to attend clinics, we see them more prepared to engage with sexual health services online. And we see a greater kind of efficacy and agency in young people, which enables them to take care of their physical health, and also their relational health. So we see young people being better equipped to understand their boundaries, and to be able to understand things like sex and the law and consent, which are areas which lots of people, young people and adults still really struggle with. We see them being able to assert their boundaries better, we see them able to talk about what they want, what they don't want, we see them able to, or to be upskilled to talk about consent, with prospective sexual partners with boyfriends or girlfriends, etc, we see them being able to understand and assert what works for them physically, sexually, mentally, and what doesn't work for them. And to be able to hold those boundaries a little bit better.

Joe Mcloughlin 6:53

Just going back to a phrase you used there was the physical health and relational health...in getting ready for today and kind of talking with a lot of our members who are dealing with post 16s, people who are outside of the school system within the skills sector within the FE sector, the impression I get is that most of those 16 year olds have the kind of biological knowledge. So they have the knowledge regarding physical health - that was done kind of very well, or at least to a certain standard at schools - but where they struggle is the kind of the more intangible factors of the relational health, like how do you maintain good relationships? How do you navigate challenges posed by society? Am I right, in kind of that view? Is that a pattern that you're seeing amongst kind of post 16s in your work?

Dougie Boyd 7:36

I would be a little bit more pessimistic than that actually. Many schools do the biological curriculum around sex and relationships well, but they tend not to do

them frequently. And they tend not to repeat them. I don't think young people who are entering post 16 education are always as well equipped or well educated as we would expect them to be. And particularly those young people who have attended school in recent years through the pandemic through lockdowns, we don't really have any accurate information or data on what attendance or remote learning, etc, has done to there, you know, grasp of that well rounded curriculum. Many schools do it well, but also many schools don't do it well. The best curriculum approach to something like sex and relationships is dealing with both the physical and relational aspects at the same time. But there's also an element of working within a spiral curriculum as a pedagogic model. So that when something...when a piece of content or a new piece of learning is introduced once, then young people are given several opportunities to spiral back to that same piece of learning, and look at it in a different way and apply their different life contexts to that piece of learning. So a young person may have been delivered the sex and biology lessons really effectively in Year 7, but circling back to that curriculum in Year 8, in Year 10, and in Year 11, gives them a different opportunity to apply their lived experiences and their lived context to that. And I think that's something that schools have not been able to cater to particularly well. So sometimes somebody can rock up at their post 16 institution and find out that the learning that they had on kind of physical relationships actually hasn't moved on or been developed that much since they were first introduced into the topic in Year 7. So I'm not 100% convinced that young people are being adequately prepared on the kind of biological and physical aspects even, you know, pre attending a post 16 organisation.

Joe Mcloughlin 10:00

I just wanted to drill down a little bit on the kind of discussion there of like spiral curriculums and spiral pedagogy and ask kind of how then might colleges build on what's gone before? Or how - to use your phrase more pessimistically - how might they best respond to the kind of gaps in knowledge and prior provision that they're seeing?

Dougie Boyd 10:21

It's about really getting to understand your students. And so understanding what are the lived contexts that your students experience on a day to day basis, because in terms of a spiral curriculum, it's a massive change moving from a school and doing your GCSEs, to moving to a further educational college. So the whole, their whole mindset has to change. And so, you know, revisiting the basics, may feel like we're doing these young people a disservice. And of course, young people can be very critical and very vocal about, 'we've learned this already'. But actually, given that the kind of the educational context and the lived context that that young people will be experiencing the first time they move to a post 16 further

education provision, everything will be so radically different, it's not going to do any harm, to really drill back down onto the basics and to understand what they understand so far, and revisit it and then start to talk about it in terms of what they're going to experience over the next two years. It is really about planning, you know, there's something about, you know, if we just take one aspect of the RSE curriculum around healthy relationships, well, when a whole group of new learners are, you know, suddenly landed in their new FE College, a lot of the work around healthy relationships, it's going to be around friendships, around understanding how to build alliances, around friendship groups, perhaps looking at how you navigate peer pressure, how you look at how you navigate people at different developmental stages to you. But then by the time they're in their second year of FE College, and they're looking at what the next steps are, that's more kind of looking towards the future. What do healthy relationships look like, outside of this kind of safe environment of college? How can you spot when you may be being exploited? What are the signs of exploitation, and the kind of the learning changes slightly from possibly peer on peer exploitation to outside groups, outside people, and how they may choose to exploit people? So I think it's it's really about understanding who your young people are, how are they engaging with each other, you know, a rural college, you know, in a very kind of geographically dispersed area, in somewhere where there are very few points for young people to check in with each other physically, an awful lot of their relationships are going to be conducted in the digital space, that will be slightly different to a very urban college that's, you know, in the heart of a London borough. So understanding who your young people are, how can you best cater to their needs, and also listening to them in the very beginning and listening to them and finding out from them what is it that they think that they need, will help you shape that spiral curriculum.

Joe Mcloughlin 13:19

Thinking there about what you were talking about the kind of importance of understanding your young people understanding kind of your, your new additions to post 16 when they join you in the September or whatever the onboarding process is, I appreciate there's differences, and you've already highlighted a couple there between, you know, colleges in rural settings and colleges in urban settings. Do you see, or kind of in your work, have you found that there are patterns of challenges that face post 16 learners? Are there things that are kind of common amongst that demographic that they're all dealing with are all sort of struggling to overcome?

Dougie Boyd 13:50

I think it's a significant change from a very, very structured learning environment, in school, often with people and with teachers who they have been with for the past, you know, four or five years, to a move where you are much more self

directed, there is much less support, there is much less contact time. And I think that can be really, really unsettling for lots of young people. And I think we do need to acknowledge that, you know, for the first 14 years of their life, these young people have had very, very highly structured days and experiences from which they have absolutely no agency they have no agency whether they attend a lesson, don't attend a lesson, etc. They may have had some agency in what subjects that they picked at GCSE, but really that's that's kind of small fry when we look at the sudden change in environment. That's something that that lots of young people struggle with is the apparent lack of direction cementing foundations of what people need to do with their days and when. And that's not to say that I think that FE providers are, you know, feckless at all in not providing structure for for the young people who who attend their colleges. But I think that the change from that very, very highly structured, often highly punitive environment into something that is more relaxed, and something that feels different, is quite a shock for young people.

Joe Mcloughlin 15:26

And is this something you've sort of seen and heard firsthand with, with focus groups or interviews or...?

Dougie Boyd 15:33

Yeah, well, we see it in our wellbeing work. So our wellbeing work often works with young people in periods of transitions. And so the move from school into further education is one of those periods of transitions. And often we will be asked by FE colleges to work with the young people, kind of three months into the new term, when it feels like this person is struggling to kind of make the same progress to really fit in and find their place in the same way that perhaps other young people have. So we see it when we're asked to work with with young people in kind of in a one to one well being sense. But then also generally, in the in the work that we do with learners who are in their first year of FE, particularly when we're exploring things like friendships, like healthy relationships, like boundaries, like consent, we often get a sense that there is an overload of a different way of being that young people need to get hold of. And sometimes they...the feedback that they give to us is that they find the process quite exhausting, or sometimes that they find the process quite vulnerable, in that that kind of lack of structure means that they don't have the same kind of cementing foundations that they did have in school, even if they may not particularly have liked them, or they may not have worked for them.

Joe Mcloughlin 15:33

Just to clarify then, when you say that there's a...the main challenge, that kind of young people face is that it's getting to terms with that different...coming to terms with that different way of being. So that the whole transition from school to college where - as much as it's punitive, and directed in schools - it's quite safe and allows for a, you know, you can almost be a passenger, for lack of a better word. Whereas when you get to college, there's that thing of you have more freedom, but you also have more responsibility, you have more choice, but you also have more consequences. It's coming to grips with the whole package almost that is challenging, in kind of, from what you're seeing if I'm understanding you correctly.

Dougie Boyd 17:38

So I think another significant challenge is that you...I guess it builds on that, that young people are used to the school community. And they're used to a kind of an element possibly of almost like groupthink, in that young people know the school community, they know the values of the people in their school community, there's a sense of safety and surety every time that they show up to school day in day out. But when you move to colleges, and there's a whole kind of mixture of people from different schools, from different organisations who have different values, bases, who have different experiences, and I think that again, exposes young people, whether for positive or for negative probably for both, that exposes young people to a whole library of different narratives that they haven't been exposed to before. And that usually always is healthy. But actually, that that can be quite a difficult thing for young people to process. There's an awful lot of learning that they need to do, through mixing with young people who have not had the same kind of school experiences that they have. I think that that's a challenge and also engaging with young people who are at vastly different developmental stages than they are. Again, that definitely does happen in schools. But I think it's it's magnified slightly more in FE colleges.

Joe Mcloughlin 18:59

How would you recommend then that kind of colleges respond to these challenges and deal with these challenges? How would we - if there's no statutory obligation for colleges or post 16 providers to do this - how would you encourage them to sort of stop shying away from these issues or these kinds of challenges as we've described them?

Dougie Boyd 19:19

I wouldn't want to say they're shying away from them. Because I think the way that FE colleges are funded is unsatisfactory and not fit for purpose. So I think FE colleges do huge amounts of good work in this area. And I think the reason that

they do it is not that they say to themselves, we want to do something that is over and above our statutory responsibilities, but it's that they have joined the dots together and that they understand that a good RSE curriculum means that their young people will be healthier, they will be happier. There are less chances of there being significant difficulties, there are less chances of there being serious safeguarding issues. I think many FE colleges absolutely understand the rationale and the value in a good RSE curriculum. And I think they deliver a good RSE curriculum in spite of the way that they are funded and supported by government. It's that point that...and a good RSE curriculum will pay dividends, in the sense of not only does it equip people to live life in modern Britain, and that's a really, really good aim in terms of saying...and I'm sure every FE college that you speak to will at its heart, have a desire to make sure that young people can live lives that are fulfilling for them, that they can live lives where they feel they have a purpose, where they feel they have a place in the world where they are healthy and happy and motivated, we could take a very reductive view, and say that the purpose of FE colleges are, you know, to get people through their exams and get them qualifications. However, I think if you were to cut most FE colleges in half, you would see that running through their DNA would be this desire to help young people live a really good life and help young people live a life that has meaning. And so when you take that aim, it's not surprising that they would want to invest in a good RSE curriculum and good RSE provision.

Joe Mcloughlin 21:24

On a kind of practical day to day basis, where would you advise sort of staff to look for guidance on best practice or good resources or useful materials, that kind of thing?

Dougie Boyd 21:34

I was a teacher myself for many years. And I understand the challenge that you face of trying to teach a topic for which you're you're not a subject expert in, you look online, you're feeling deskilled anyway, you kind of you jump for the first thing that comes out. So there's something about encouraging teachers and lecturers to sense-check resource material as they are accessing it. So somewhere like Brook of course, or the PSHE Association, SEF, who all have quality-assured resources, many of which are freely available, some of which are behind a paywall. But there's something about checking source material, getting a sense of quality assurance - are the organisations that you're approaching, and are the organisations that you're you're working with actually fit for purpose? And this is something where the government and I do agree that when working with outside organisations, external organisations, schools and teachers should be equipped to be able to make judgments about quality assurance, but often they're not trained or they're not skilled to do that. But I think it's almost about winding it back

slightly. And it's about almost that point that I made earlier on about understanding what it is your young people need, because once you've figured out what they need, you can then build your topic curriculum. And that will then make it much easier for you to find appropriate resources. And to sense check them as as in terms of actually is this what my learners will need at this point in time. I think if we can encourage FE colleges to do that, that kind of planning work in the beginning, then it means that people are not scrabbling around trying to find resources at the last minute, because they have they have something coming up imminently. And I think unless we support FE colleges to really develop their own curriculum...we can't expect teachers or staff members to be able to articulate or quality assure any resources that they're using because they don't have that headline vision for what it is they're trying to achieve and how it is they're trying to achieve it.

Joe Mcloughlin 21:54

Recognising the issues you've just described, what would your kind of message be to policymakers?

Dougie Boyd 23:53

For policymakers, I would encourage that we dial down the rhetoric a little. So we have a situation where mandatory RSE is viewed of as being very controversial. From a personal perspective, that's quite an interesting position for Brook to find itself in because certainly when I joined Brook, about eight or nine years ago, it was actually the provision of our clinical services that was controversial, providing bespoke sexual health services for young people was viewed of as being a controversial piece of provision. And if you look back through Brook's history, and it's often been our provision of clinical services for young people, that that has often been the thing that has generated friction and controversy. Our education work, our work in schools up and down the country until recently never seemed to be the site of much conflict, because we spoke about the needs for a fact based education that enabled young people to take care of themselves and to take care of others. But definitely we are in unexpected waters where there is lots of criticism of schools who are teaching RSE, there's lots of criticism of organisations who are providing RSE. And it's felt like it's become quite an angry space and quite a fevered space. So in terms of, of policymakers, I would ask that we all kind of dial down the rhetoric a little, and that we are driven by the data. And at the moment, what data there is, isn't telling us much, because we've not had enough time to embed a curriculum, schools haven't been supported well enough to be able to confidently say that what they're providing meets young people's needs, or it doesn't meet young people's needs. So there is currently a review that was always planned as part of the legislation. And we do welcome the review. But I think in in terms of what Brook would really like to see, from a policy perspective,



we would obviously like to see mandatory RSE protected in its current form, we don't want to see any rolling back of that we don't want to see any reduction of schools' responsibilities to provide that curriculum for their young people. And we do want to see that extended into further education. Ideally, it will be extended up into university education as well. More and more Brook is called upon to provide work for young people who are in their first year at university. And that signifies that there's a real demand for this work. And there's a real demand for young people to access this learning and to understand what's going on for them and what's going on for their peers. So yes, we would like to see mandatory RSE definitely extended into...the responsibility extended into further education. And then we would like to see that resourced - further education is not resourced and, given the complexities of the provision that they provide, and the vast range of different styles, different topics, different accommodations that they need to make, further education does need to be funded better. So we would like to see the responsibility rolled out, but we would also like to see the funding rolled out to support FE colleges to be able to deliver that. This doesn't need to be a conflict, but it does feel as if it's heading in that direction.

Joe Mcloughlin 27:21

Thank you to my guest Dougie Boyd, and to you for listening. We hope you enjoyed the conversation that has got you thinking about the connections between relationships and sex education, diversity and wider society. You can keep up to date with the podcast on social media. Follow us on Twitter @SkillsEduGroup or search Skills and Education Group on LinkedIn and Facebook. Do remember to subscribe wherever you receive your podcasts and let's go further together.