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Heather Marshall

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Beyond panic: navigating the tides of change in relationships and sex education

Heather Marshall 

Department of Secondary, Further Education & Training, Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper critically evaluates societal reactions to integrating LGBTQ+ content into the Relationship and Sex Education (RSE) curriculum in England and Wales. Utilising Stanley Cohen's theory of moral panics, it examines the roles of media, moral entrepreneurs, authorities, and the public in shaping debates around educational reforms. The paper highlights the complexities of balancing traditional values and inclusivity in education, emphasising the necessity of a considerate and comprehensive RSE approach. The study employs mixed methods, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses, to explore the multi-faceted nature of this societal issue and its wider implications.

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Moral panic; Relationships and Sex Education (RSE); LGBTQ+; inclusivity; social values

Introduction

This study explores the inclusion of LGBTQ+ content in the Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) curriculum in England and Wales, focusing on its societal impact and differentiation from earlier moral panics. It navigates the integration of educational inclusiveness with traditional values against a backdrop of evolving societal norms concerning gender and sexuality.

Highlighting the complexity of contemporary societal values and the growing recognition of LGBTQ+ rights, the analysis provides insights into societal shifts and the tension between inclusivity and tradition in education. It contributes a nuanced perspective on moral panics, emphasising the importance of this research focus to understanding societal change and informing educational policy.

Using Cohen's (1972) theory of moral panics as a framework, the paper analyses the unique aspects of this situation, including public forums, media portrayals, governmental actions, and the influence of moral entrepreneurs. It investigates the catalysts of this moral panic, such as media sensationalism and parental mobilisation, and examines how social control agents shape public attitudes towards LGBTQ+ inclusivity in education.

The aim is to provide a nuanced understanding of current RSE debates and its implications for educational reforms in a society navigating diversity and tradition. This exploration offers insights into the complexities of educational reform, reflecting a society's ongoing effort to educate its youth in a manner that respects diversity while maintaining its values.

CONTACT Heather Marshall  marshall@edgehill.ac.uk

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Analytic methodology

This study leading to this paper used a mixed-methods approach to analyse aspects of the England and Wales RSE guidance debate, integrating qualitative public discourse and media analysis with quantitative data analysis. By systematically reviewing both mainstream and alternative media platforms using specific RSE-related keywords, for example 'LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools' and 'sex education policy', within a predefined timeframe, I identified key social actors and influential media sources. These were chosen based on their reach, frequency of RSE coverage, and impact on public discourse. The content analysis framework was initiated with broad thematic coding from keywords, moving gradually towards more focused coding on detailed sub-themes such as parental rights and moral panic in RSE discussions. This process included analysing narratives on key controversies and issues within RSE debates. By methodically synthesising these themes, I constructed narratives that captured the wide-ranging nature of perspectives and debates surrounding RSE, offering a nuanced understanding of the influence of different stakeholders on public and policy discourse.

RSE development

In 2017, England and Wales initiated a progressive shift in educational policy on relationship and sexual health. Education Secretary Justine Greening declared the existing curriculum outdated and in need of revision, leading to the introduction of 'Relationships and Sex Education' as a statutory subject in secondary education, and emphasising teaching about diverse relationships and their impact on health and well-being (Department for Education (DfE) 2017). The Children and Social Work Act (Children England 2018) formalised these changes, granting Greening the authority to establish new regulations for primary and secondary education. This update was necessitated by the outdated nature of the previous curriculum, which had not been revised for 20 years. Significant changes had occurred during that time, including shifts in societal norms, attitudes towards relationships and sexuality, the need to address contemporary issues such as online safety, consent, and the recognition of diverse relationships and identities. The goal of the update was to provide children with relevant knowledge and skills to grow up healthy, happy, and safe, empowering them to make informed decisions about their well-being, health, and relationships. Additionally, it aimed to prepare them for the challenges and opportunities of modern England and Wales and successful adult lives.

Further to this, in 2019, a legal framework in England and Wales mandated relationship education for primary school children and inclusive RSE for secondary education, applying to all types of schools. Updated guidance from the government directed English and Welsh schools to align their policies with legal requirements and community values, involving parents in the process. While sex education is not mandatory for primary schools, those choosing to teach it must be transparent in their policies and engage parents in curriculum development. Schools are also required to have written policies for teaching Relationships Education in primary and RSE in secondary schools, ensuring these meet pupils' and community needs, as outlined in the 2019 guidelines (DfE 2019, para 13), updating previous guidance from 2000.

Shifts in relation to LGBTQ+ inclusion

The 2019 Department for Education (DfE) guidance marks a departure from previous sex and relationship education frameworks by explicitly mandating the integration of LGBTQ+ content into the curriculum at a ‘timely point’, suggesting a shift towards a more inclusive educational approach (DfE 2019). This is a significant change from prior models, which implicitly centred on heteronormative conceptions of ‘real sex’, thereby marginalising alternative sexual orientations and identities (Grant and Nash 2018; Hoefler and Hoefler 2017; Moran 2001).

The assertion of progressiveness in the 2019 legislation can be substantiated by examining the broader outcomes associated with teaching inclusive RSE. Research indicates that comprehensive sexuality education, which engages with diverse sexual orientations and identities, can lead to reductions in rates of teenage pregnancy and delay the initiation of sexual activity among young people (Rabbitte and Enriques 2019). Despite this, traditional RSE delivery has often perpetuated a heterosexual bias, neglected the needs and experiences of gender and sexuality diverse students and contributing to their exclusion from meaningful participation in sex and sexuality education discussions (Elia and Eliason 2010). This exclusion is further exacerbated by prevailing homophobic attitudes within many educational settings (Stonewall 2017).

The 2019 curriculum revisions, therefore, represent not just a legislative change but a necessary step towards fostering an environment of respect and celebration of diversity, as advocated by organisations such as Stonewall (2022). By embedding LGBTQ+ content within the RSE curriculum, the legislation aligns with a human rights-based perspective, advocating for the inclusion and equal treatment of all students, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. This approach not only addresses the immediate educational needs of LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ students alike but also contributes to a broader social movement towards inclusivity and acceptance.

Moral panic

Frothingham’s (2023) definition of moral panic as the intense fear, concern or anger felt by a community when it perceives its cultural values or interests under threat, provides a modern entry point into understanding the concept originally coined by the sociologist Stanley Cohen in the 1970s. Cohen (1972) in his seminal work characterises moral panic as society’s disproportionate response to perceived deviations or threats, a phenomenon often intensified by media and authority figures, leading to what has been termed widespread public hysteria. However, this use of ‘hysteria’ merits careful examination for its potential to oversimplify or mischaracterise public reactions, which are often grounded in real concerns and shaped by complex socio-political dynamics.

Cohen’s observation that media and authorities play significant roles in magnifying these reactions also invites a critical analysis of the mechanisms of power and influence at play. Selective media framing and strategic political manipulation of public discourse can significantly skew public perceptions and responses, suggesting that what is often labelled as hysteria might instead reflect deeper societal tensions and anxieties. This perspective urges a more nuanced understanding of moral panics, not as irrational responses but as indicators of broader social and cultural conflicts.

Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody (2001) contribute to this understanding by examining how public anxieties label certain behaviours as 'deviant' and perceive them as threats to the social order. This process can arouse intense social concern over specific issues. Ringrose (2016) expands on this by explaining how moral panic can capture the public imagination, particularly in the context of education and issues related to gender and sexuality. Moral panic can lead to controversy and fear, influencing public discourse and policymaking in these areas.

As Ringrose (*ibid.*) notes, the concept of scapegoating is integral to moral panic. Discussing that moral panics often involves blaming individuals or a specific group for various societal problems, thus diverting attention from other underlying issues. This simplifies complex social problems by attributing them to a single source, framing them as the root of the crisis or threat. In educational contexts, moral panic can manifest in response to changes that challenge traditional norms, leading to heated debates and social polarisation.

Understanding the concept of moral panic therefore is essential in analysing how societal attitudes and anxieties shape public discourse and influence policies, particularly in the context of RSE.

Controversies associated with RSE reforms

To identify the main issues with RSE reforms, a multi-faceted analytic process was employed. This involved reviewing the academic literature, analysing policy documents, examining media reports, and considering feedback from educators, parents, and advocacy groups. Through this comprehensive approach, key themes and concerns were distilled, highlighting issues like the age-appropriateness of content, parental rights, LGBTQ+ inclusion, perceived threats to children, and cultural-religious conflicts.

Firstly, the historical and cultural context of 'moral panics', as explored in Falkof's (2018) critical study, provides essential insights into current RSE reform debates. This research examines past instances of societal anxieties that manifested as moral panics, such as those initially studied by Cohen, notably the 'Mods and Rockers' conflict of the 1960s in England, and later expanded upon by Falkof. Understanding these examples clarifies how public fears and media narratives can exaggerate perceived threats. Falkof's analysis of contemporary gender, sexuality, and educational reforms offers a framework for understanding how moral panics evolve in modern societies, highlighting the role of media and public discourse. This context is pivotal in framing the RSE debates within a broader pattern of societal reactions to changes, especially in education and moral values. It is HELPFUL in dissecting the complex dynamics present within these debates, with a particular focus on the heightened reactions and concerns regarding the inclusion of LGBTQ+ content and its perceived impact on children and cultural values.

The main controversies within the context of the RSE reforms in England and Wales can be summarised as follows:

- **Age-Appropriateness of Content:** Concerns revolve particularly around the inclusion of LGBTQ+ relationships in educational content, reflecting worries about the impact on child development and exposure. Researchers such as Whittaker (2019) have

highlighted debates over what content is deemed appropriate for children at different ages.

- **Parental Involvement and Rights:** This aspect involves navigating a delicate balance between achieving educational goals and respecting the deeply held family values of parents. The National Education Union (NEU) in 2020 emphasised the complexity of ensuring parental rights while pursuing inclusive educational objectives.
- **LGBTQ+ Inclusion Concerns:** Resistance to the inclusion of LGBTQ+ content in education is often due to societal shifts towards greater acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities. This resistance underscores the ongoing challenge of aligning evolving educational objectives with a spectrum of beliefs and values (NEU, 2020.)
- **Perceived Threat to Children's Innocence:** Some perceive the inclusion of certain materials in the curriculum as a potential threat to children's innocence, fearing exposure to inappropriate material or indoctrination. Whittaker (2019) discusses how these perceptions stem from a desire to protect what is seen as children's inherent innocence.
- **Cultural and Religious Conflicts:** Resistance to LGBTQ+ topics being included in the curriculum often originates from certain communities, primarily due to religious or cultural beliefs. These communities may view LGBTQ+ identities and relationships as incompatible with their values, a concern highlighted by the NEU (2020).

These concerns arising from RSE reforms in England and Wales point to a complex mix of societal issues, including debates over age-appropriateness, parental rights, LGBTQ+ inclusion, perceived threats to children, and cultural-religious conflicts. Contextualised within Falkof's (2018) framework of moral panics, these issues signal the complex dynamics of societal response to educational changes. This understanding is key to navigating the challenges of implementing RSE reforms and balancing educational objectives with diverse societal values and expectations.

RSE moral panic evolution

I turn now to focus on the development and progression of moral panics related to RSE, analysing key literature to understand historical and contemporary contexts. It examines the roles of media, politics, and international perspectives in shaping moral panics around RSE, aiming to shed light on their development and influence on public discourse and policy.

Early perceptions of sexuality and RSE

Weeks's (1985) influential study *Sexuality and its Discontents: Meanings, Myths, and Modern Sexualities*, provides critical insights into how social attitudes towards sexuality have shaped discourse around RSE. By analysing the impact of cultural, religious, political, and social norms, Weeks uncovers the roots of moral panics that continue to influence RSE debates, showing that concerns over sex and sexuality education reflect long-standing societal tensions. This analysis, alongside Schiebinger's (1993) exploration of gender's influence on science and Segal's (1994) critique of heterosexual norms, underscores the critical need to incorporate historical and gender-aware perspectives into RSE curriculum

development. Their collective work highlight the ongoing challenges in sex and sexuality education, emphasising the importance of an approach that takes into account the complexities of societal norms, gender politics, and the evolution of moral panics. This kind of broader understanding is key to navigating some of the controversies surrounding RSE and advancing an educational framework that is both inclusive and responsive to the needs of all students.

Media narratives in RSE moral panics

Nicholas and O'Malley's (2019) research critically explores the role of media in exacerbating moral panics within RSE debates, pinpointing sensationalism as a key process that misrepresents RSE topics and brands them as societal dangers. This process, exacerbated by the ubiquity of digital platforms, contributes to the media's substantial impact on shaping both public sentiment and emotional reactions towards RSE. Foregrounding this, Gauntlett (2002) and Critcher (2003) investigated the media's broader effects on societal views of gender and sexuality, advocating for the integration of media literacy into RSE curricula. Their findings stress the need for an educational approach that fosters the ability to critically assess media portrayals of sexuality and gender. Such a perspective not only underlines the importance of media narratives in shaping societal norms and fears, but also highlights the crucial role of critical media studies in RSE to navigate moral panics effectively and promote more informed public discourse about sex and relationships.

Political motivations in RSE moral panics

Lancaster's (2011) analysis critically engages with the political dimensions of moral panics, shedding light on their strategic use in RSE debates. Lancaster elucidates how political figures and institutions harness these panics, often framing themselves as champions of traditional values in order to secure political capital. This manoeuvring not only influences public sentiment but also steers the creation of restrictive RSE policies, purportedly in defence of societal norms. The essence of Lancaster's findings is the calculated exploitation of RSE controversies for political advantage, underscoring the need to discern the political underpinnings of the moral panics associated with RSE. Lesko's (2001) work, which explores the construction and manipulation of societal perceptions of adolescence, adds further to Lancaster's arguments. Together, their research presents a compelling critique of how moral panics, rooted in political strategy, impact educational policies and practices, with an encouragement to educators and policymakers to work towards an RSE curriculum that genuinely reflects the diverse needs and rights of students, free from the distortions created by divisive political agendas.

International perspectives on RSE moral panics

Fahs's research (Fahs, Dudy, and Stage 2013) provides a critical examination of moral panics within the RSE framework, emphasising their widespread occurrence across diverse cultural and societal landscapes. Her findings underscore the need to approach RSE-related moral panics with a sensitivity to cross-cultural variations, advocating against a one-size-fits-all methodology. Fahs illuminates how local

customs, historical backdrops, and societal beliefs shape responses to RSE curricula, thereby revealing the nuanced ways in which moral panics are manifested internationally. Her research invites a critical reassessment of conventional approaches to addressing moral panics in RSE, highlighting the value of learning from international experience. Fahs's call for cross-cultural dialogue and learning to navigate moral panics encourages the use of a strategic approach to fostering more inclusive and effective RSE programmes.

Section 28's legacy and its impact on contemporary RSE debates

In the 1980s, Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act introduced by the then Conservative Government sought to prevent local authorities from promoting 'the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship' significantly shaped discourse about RSE. This era, defined by heightened societal anxiety and stringent attacks on same-sex relationships in education, has left a legacy. The repercussions of Section 28 are evident today in reluctance to discuss LGBTQ+ topics and the stigmatisation of gender and sexuality minorities in educational settings. Understanding this historical context is vital to grasping the complexities of current RSE debates, as it underscores the ongoing struggle to balance educational content with societal values and expectations, focusing on inclusivity and diverse representations.

Integrating perspectives

Taken together, the above perspectives offer a lens for examining current discussion within the broader scope of societal responses to change and diversity. They highlight the ongoing effort to reconcile educational objectives with societal norms and values, emphasising the importance of historical context, media literacy, political acumen, and international inclusivity. This integrated approach to understanding RSE debates fosters a more informed and inclusive approach, reflecting an ongoing endeavour to navigate the intricacies of moral panics and their impact on education policies and practices.

Agents of moral panic

Cohen (2002) identified four principal actors in the creation of moral panics: mass media, moral entrepreneurs, agents of social control, and the public. By applying Cohen's framework to RSE changes, particularly regarding LGBTQ+ content, it becomes evident that the dynamics of moral panics have consistent patterns. The interaction between the mass media, moral entrepreneurs, authorities, and the public shapes current discourse and policies surrounding RSE, demonstrating the recurring nature of societal anxieties in relation to sex and sexuality education.

The mass media

Media outlets have long played a pivotal role in shaping public discourse about RSE. Their coverage often leans towards sensationalism, framing LGBTQ+ educational content as a radical departure from so-called traditional values. This portrayal can be witnessed in

various newspapers and online platforms, where headlines and stories frequently exaggerate the scale or nature of LGBTQ+ content present in RSE. For instance, tabloid headlines by the *Daily Mail* newspaper (Matthews 2022) and features in *The Spectator* magazine (Moore 2023) have recently characterised the teaching of transgender issues as controversial, or extreme. Such stories suggest children are being exposed to what they term ‘transgender indoctrination’, a narrative that fuels fears of societal change and challenges to existing norms.

These media narratives contribute significantly to the construction of moral panics, portraying LGBTQ+ inclusivity in RSE as a substantial threat to the social fabric. However, the media’s role extends beyond mere reporting of events; it actively shapes perceptions by tapping into and amplifying existing fears and prejudices within society. The result is seldom a balanced view of the RSE curriculum, often omitting the positive impacts of inclusive education and the actual content that is being taught.

As the media stokes these flames of concern, politicians and policymakers often find themselves pressured to respond. This has led to significant actions, such as the England and Wales government recently (2023) announcing a review of RSE guidance following sensationalised portraying transgender issues and same-sex relationships are contentious aspects of the RSE curriculum. Such decisions, often documented on official platforms like gov.uk (DfE 2023), reveal how media-driven narratives can influence policy-making and public opinion.

Moral entrepreneurs

Moral entrepreneurs, both historically and in the current context of RSE, have played a pivotal role in shaping societal discourse, particularly concerning LGBTQ+ curriculum content. These individuals or groups, considering themselves custodians of societal values, have actively campaigned against what they perceive as deviations from traditional norms. Modern-day moral entrepreneurs, in ways reminiscent to those advocating for policies such as Section 28 in the 1980s, comprise a diverse group comprising parent associations, religious factions, and a few educators. They are united in their belief they are safeguarding conventional educational values and often align their efforts with media portrayals, for example educational content as radical or detrimental to societal values, to cast progressive changes in RSE in a negative light.

An example of contemporary moral entrepreneurship in the context of RSE is provided by the group Parent Power. This organisation positions itself as a staunch defender of parental authority in the educational sphere. In its publication, *The Civil Rights of RSE* (Parent Power n.d.), the organisation advances a critique of state intervention in the moral and values education of children. Their primary contention centres around the mandatory inclusion of reference to diverse forms of relationships, including LGBTQ+ issues, in the RSE curriculum. Parent Power argues that such an inclusive approach runs against the convictions of many parents, particularly those belonging to major world religions. The Christian Institute is another significant moral entrepreneur in this arena. It too has raised concern over the inclusion of LGBTQ+ content in education, suggesting that these changes could catalyse the development of a ‘sex education industry’ (2019) dedicated to promoting explicit material. Their stance is that recent developments not only challenge established norms but also weaken the traditional values held by many in society.

The actions and rhetoric of moral entrepreneurs have had profound societal impacts, as evidenced by the rise in hate crimes against LGBTQ+ individuals. The Office for National Statistics (Stonewall 2023) has reported that hate crimes based on sexual orientation saw an overall increase of 112% between 2018–2023. The British Social Attitudes survey further reveals a trend of increasing prejudice towards trans people in Britain. This has been accompanied by the growth of negative political and media narratives. Robbie de Santos, Director of External Affairs at Stonewall, highlights the reality behind these numbers. He has expressed concern over the lack of serious and timely action by political leaders, who, instead of addressing the issue, often contribute to dehumanising and violent rhetoric against LGBTQ+ people. Therefore, it is clear that the discourse shaped by moral entrepreneurs not only permeates public opinion but also manifests in tangible and harmful ways, underscoring the urgent need for counter-narratives that foster understanding, respect, and protection for LGBTQ+ individuals within society.

Agents within the social control system

In Cohen's original work on moral panics, authorities within the social control system were often the law enforcers, politicians, and policymakers who acted upon the societal concerns of the time, shaping the narrative and response to perceived threats. Today, these figures encompass a broader spectrum, including contemporary legislators, school boards, and governmental education departments, whose responses to RSE discourse continue to reflect those historical patterns, particularly in the context of LGBTQ+ content, thereby playing a decisive role in the development and implementation of educational policy.

Miriam Cates, a Member of Parliament, and former secondary science teacher, exemplifies the influence of such authorities. In 2023, she described the new RSE framework as 'deeply questionable', raising significant concerns during Prime Minister's Questions. Cates' remarks about 'graphic lessons' and the teaching of numerous genders in British schools positioned the RSE curriculum as extreme and inappropriate (The Week 2023). The emotive nature of her language, combined with her role as an MP, gave these concerns a national platform, contributing to the heightened public debate on RSE.

The report compiled by Cates and the New Social Covenant Unit (2019) reflects these concerns. It suggests widespread indoctrination and age-inappropriate teaching within the RSE curriculum, particularly since the introduction of compulsory RSE under recent educational regulations. The report criticises RSE providers for allegedly contravening statutory guidance, promoting explicit resources, and using the curriculum as a vehicle for political change. It also raises the alarm over the influence of individuals with radical positions on sex, gender, and sexuality, which, according to the report, puts children at risk of various harms, including sexualisation and political indoctrination.

In response to these concerns, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced a review of the RSE statutory guidance (Cates 2023). Sunak's decision, while addressing Cates' concerns, potentially amplifies the moral panic surrounding RSE, particularly regarding LGBT content. The review, without clear evidence of widespread issues, can be seen as an implicit validation of the concerns raised. This situation risks creating a climate of heightened

sensitivity and fear, potentially leading to public outcry and demands for policy changes based on perceived, rather than substantiated, risks to children.

The engagement of authorities in response to the evolving narrative around RSE, especially their readiness to review and potentially alter the curriculum based on claims that resonate with societal fears, demonstrates the significant impact of moral panics in shaping educational policies. This dynamic is further intensified by the emotive nature of the debate surrounding the well-being of children, a topic that can easily rally public sentiment and lead to calls for drastic action. The cycle of concern, media coverage, public outcry, and policy response, driven by the actions of authorities within the social control system, encapsulates the essence of a moral panic, particularly when it involves sensitive topics like RSE and LGBT inclusivity.

The role of the public

In the context of RSE debates, the role of the public is both crucial and complex, significantly influencing the dynamics of moral panic. This public is not homogeneous; it comprises diverse groups, each with distinct views and reactions, shaping the nature of moral panics as conceptualised by Cohen (2002). The public's interaction with the wealth of information and viewpoints, particularly regarding LGBTQ+ content in RSE, is a pivotal aspect of this dynamic.

Media narratives play a key role in this interaction, often portraying LGBTQ+ content in RSE as a significant societal shift, potentially challenging traditional values, and perceptions of childhood innocence. This portrayal, amplified by media and reinforced by politicians and policymakers, creates an atmosphere of heightened public concern. Such dynamics illustrate how the collective influence of media narratives and political reactions shape public perception in the RSE context.

The emergence of online forums, social networks, and local gatherings as key spaces for debate about changes in RSE further underscores the public's role. Platforms like mumsnet.com host a spectrum of discussions that range from strong disapproval to support for curriculum changes. Discussions often revolve around themes like the perceived 'over-sexualising' in RSE or debates on teaching gender identity ideology. These forums reflect the public's diverse and immediate reactions to RSE curriculum changes.

Social media platforms have become significant in shaping and reflecting public opinion on RSE reforms. Groups such as 'Parents For Education', 'Safe Schools Alliance', and 'Mandate Now' have considerable online presence and actively engage in discourse against certain aspects of RSE reforms. Their activities on platforms like Twitter, with numerous followers and tweets, highlight the role of social media as both a barometer and amplifier of public sentiment regarding educational changes.

Public sentiment in the context of RSE debates often transitions from concern to a definitive call for action. This shift is sometimes based on inaccuracies or incomplete narratives, leading to a critical point in the cycle of moral panic, akin to historical societal disputes like the mod and rocker altercations. For example, the controversy around Warwickshire Council's 'The All About Me (AAM)' programme, initially intended to educate about healthy relationships, faced opposition from groups asserting that it contradicted traditional values and led to the premature sexualisation of children (Layton 2020; BBC News 2019b).

The 2019 controversy at Parkfield Community School in Birmingham provides another striking example of the public's impact on educational debates, especially regarding LGBTQ+ inclusion in RSE. The incident began with a parental petition expressing concerns that the school's teachings conflicted with Islamic principles, leading to widespread protests. This situation escalated into broader debates over cultural values and educational reform, reflecting the intersection of the aim to protect children with concerns about cultural and social identity (BBC News 2019b; Roberts 2019).

These incidents illustrate the public's significant role in response to RSE curriculum changes, particularly regarding LGBTQ+ content. The public's reaction within Cohen's moral panic framework is a societal moment where child protection concerns intersect with broader issues of cultural and social identity. Understanding the public's role in these debates is crucial for navigating the complexities surrounding RSE curriculum reforms and addressing the concerns of various stakeholders.

By applying Cohen's framework to the historical and contemporary context of RSE changes, particularly regarding LGBTQ+ content, it becomes evident that the dynamics of moral panics have consistent patterns. The interaction between the mass media, moral entrepreneurs, authorities, and the public shapes the discourse and policies surrounding RSE, demonstrating the recurring nature of societal reactions to changes in sexuality education. This analysis highlights the importance of understanding these patterns to navigate the complexities of RSE reforms and address the challenges posed by moral panics in a balanced and inclusive manner.

Contemporary challenges and perspectives in RSE policy

In addressing contemporary shifts in RSE discourse, it is necessary to examine elements not present in Cohen's original account. Today's discourse includes the digital dissemination of information, the increased visibility of gender and sexual minorities, and a globalised exchange of educational practices – all of which shape the modern contours of moral panics in ways that demand our attention now more than ever. These subsections will explore the interplay between these more modern factors and traditional concerns, illustrating how they converge to influence current educational policies and societal attitudes towards RSE.

Precious children

In 2023, UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's 2023 promised to review the RSE curriculum with an emphasis on protecting Britain's 'precious children' (Murphy and Clarence-Smith 2023). His response highlights the moral panic that often accompanies discussions of RSE. Weeks's (1985) exploration of societal attitudes towards sexuality offers a framework that situates contemporary concerns for children's vulnerability within a historical context, reflecting deep-seated norms and the enduring narrative of childhood innocence.

Weeks (*ibid.*) argues that societal views on protecting childhood innocence are closely linked to cultural, religious and political norms shaping public and policy responses to RSE. This framing of children as inherently vulnerable and in need of protection from certain RSE topics reflects longstanding societal trends rather than new concerns. By viewing Sunak's stance through Weeks's perspective, we can see how the portrayal of RSE

as a threat to children's well-being is part of a broader narrative that has historically positioned sex and sexuality education as disruptive of societal norms and children's innocence.

This construction of childhood is not merely descriptive, however, since it serves specific social and moral purposes. It revolves around the ideals of protection and preservation, framing children as beings who must be shielded from certain realities of the world, including issues of sexuality and gender identity. Such a perspective can lead to a heightened sense of urgency and concern when discussing educational content such as that typical of RSE, particularly when it involves engagement with LGBTQ+ topics.

The role of misinformation and political affirmation in fuelling moral panics

Misinformation can significantly fuel moral panics, as Schiebinger (1993) underscores in the context of RSE debates, particularly when it is intertwined with the contested notion of children's 'innocence'. James and Prout (1997) in their work on reconstructing childhood, offer a more contemporary and relevant exploration of how societal norms and values shape, and are reflected in, our understanding of childhood innocence, pointing out the fluid and socially constructed nature of this concept. This perspective is crucial as it reveals that the term innocence, often leveraged by critics of RSE, lacks a universally accepted definition, contributing to misunderstandings and moral panic. Notions of innocence, therefore, are deeply embedded in cultural, structural, and individual layers: culturally, they mirror societal expectations about childhood and sexuality; structurally, they are influenced by education policies and media portrayals; and individually, they are filtered through parents' and educators' personal beliefs and experiences, affecting their approach to RSE content. Recognising this multifaceted framework is vital for developing educational strategies that embrace this complexity, promoting an environment of respect and inclusivity, while addressing the tensions that underpin moral panics in RSE.

Misinformation in RSE debates often stems from misunderstood ideas about childhood 'innocence'. Equating innocence with ignorance, some argue that knowledge about sexuality and relationships corrupts a child's purity. This view neglects the importance of providing accurate, age-appropriate information for children's safety and well-being, while fostering respect for diversity. Contrary to the belief that RSE erodes innocence when it covers topics such as LGBTQ+ identities, factual and sensitive RSE has a protective and empowering role to play. By helping children understand difference and diversity RSE safeguards them against abuse and exploitation. Redefining innocence in RSE should involve shifting from protecting children from knowledge to empowering them with the right information, challenging misconceptions and preparing them to navigate the world responsibly.

A critical examination of the RSE discourse reveals further inaccuracies including:

- The timing of information. Good quality RSE is carefully tailored so as to be age-appropriate, countering claims of premature provision. It prepares young people for future challenges in line with their developmental stage and understanding (Brook 2023).

- Introduction to LGBTQ+ Identities. RSE acknowledges societal diversity and does not ‘introduce’ children to being LGBTQ+. It does not sway a child’s sexual orientation or gender identity but promotes respect for diverse family structures (Whittaker 2019).
- External RSE Content Control. Contrary to myth, schools maintain curriculum autonomy, leveraging resources and expert guidance for the teaching of RSE (Sex Education Forum 2023).
- Secrecy from Parents. Under the RSE guidance (DfE 2019), schools must inform parents about the policy and curriculum. Since 2019, extensive communication has occurred. While lesson details may vary, parents are reassured by understanding the curriculum’s structure and lesson schedules.
- Teacher Bias. Teachers must follow the Teachers Standards (DfE 2021), which govern their conduct and prohibit the imposition of personal beliefs on students in RSE.
- Parental Role in RSE. While parental involvement is crucial, not all children receive RSE at home. Some topics may be unsafe to discuss in certain homes, underscoring the need for school based RSE (Brook 2023).
- RSE Guidance Fitness. The 2019 RSE guidance (DfE 2020) was informed by research evidence and shaped through consultation with expert organisations in health, education, safeguarding, and faith communities.

Misinformation about RSE, particularly concerning its impact on children’s innocence and the introduction of LGBTQ+ topics, plays a central role in fuelling moral panics, a phenomenon deeply rooted in the amplification of baseless concerns by media, moral entrepreneurs, and public discourse. This reflects Cohen’s (2002) stages of moral panic, where by societal fears, often lacking in evidence, are exaggerated to oppose RSE’s inclusive and educational goals. These goals aim to equip students with an understanding of societal diversity and personal safety, supported by transparent policies and professional teaching standards. However, the discourse has shifted, especially with the legal recognition of LGBTQ+ rights, transforming moral panics from protective responses to tools used by politicians and public figures to affirm their own positions and agendas. This strategic manipulation, highlighted by Clay (2024), signifies a complex evolution in moral panics, where political and educational debates intertwine, demonstrating how contemporary moral panics, though dressed in new guises, continue to challenge the progress of inclusive education by leveraging unfounded claims to sway public opinion and policy.

Assessing RSE curriculum debate through the lens of moral panic

In current discourse surrounding the RSE curriculum, particularly the inclusion of LGBTQ+ content, we can observe a scenario reminiscent of a moral panic, as defined by Cohen (2002). However, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of its significance and evolution, it is important to contextualise the contemporary moral panic against the historical framework offered by other moral panics.

As we delve into the dynamics of the current response to RSE, it becomes evident that media sensationalism has played a pivotal role in shaping public perception and exacerbating moral panics, mirroring the patterns observed on past occasions. Mass media outlets have seized upon the curriculum updates, framing LGBTQ+ inclusivity as a departure from societal norms and values.

Headlines in various national publications have been carefully crafted to elicit strong emotional responses, contributing to heightened public anxiety regarding these educational changes.

This pattern of media sensationalism echoes the historical relationship between media narratives and moral panics as highlighted by Nicholas and O'Malley's research, which delves into how media outlets possess the power to frame controversial issues – such as RSE – in provocative ways that elicit strong emotional reactions from the public, emphasises the influential role of the media in shaping and amplifying moral panics specifically concerning the content and reform of RSE. They demonstrate how media outlets can frame controversial issues, like RSE, in ways that provoke emotional responses and trigger heightened public concern.

The involvement of moral entrepreneurs in heightening public fears and anxieties, another hallmark of moral panics, is also a recurring theme in this more recent scenario. These groups and individuals, positioning themselves as defenders of traditional values, have harnessed the media narrative to fuel campaigns opposing the RSE changes. Their efforts have been characterised by vocal opposition, legal challenges, and the dissemination of reports aimed at shaping public opinion and influencing policy. This aligns with the historical role of moral entrepreneurs in instigating and sustaining earlier moral panics such as those concerning those concerning rock 'n' roll music in the 1950s and the video game controversies in the 1980s and 1990s.

Furthermore, agents of social control, such as politicians and education policymakers, have found themselves responding to the escalated concern, echoing the pattern observed in previous moral panics. In some settings, calls for reviews or modifications to the RSE curriculum have been made, inadvertently validating the concerns raised by moral entrepreneurs and media sensationalism. This response from agents of social control has the potential to exacerbate the moral panic further.

At a grassroots level, public engagement in heated debates, both online and offline, mirrors the reactions witnessed in past moral panics. Discussion fora and social media platforms have become arenas for the expression of diverse opinions and arguments regarding the RSE reforms. Upon occasion, public sentiment, shaped by media reports, the actions of moral entrepreneurs and agents of social control has led to direct action, such as through protests and petitions – a phenomenon also observed in moral panics throughout history.

However, upon closer examination, it is apparent that many of the fears fuelling this moral panic are rooted in misinformation and a lack of evidence. This parallels the historical tendency of moral panics to be driven by exaggerated or unfounded claims. Contrary to the suggestion that RSE is a threat to children's innocence or prematurely exposes them to adult concerns, the new RSE curriculum in England and Wales has been carefully designed to be age-appropriate and educational in character (Brook 2023). Its primary aim is to empower young people with the knowledge they need to understand and respect social diversity, cultivate healthy relationships, and navigate personal challenges.

This presence of misinformation and unfounded fears in the current moral panic underscores the need to critically explore what it really is that is driving the homophobia and transphobia that characterises current events. The current moral panic around RSE, steeped in misinformation and unfounded fears, raises critical questions

about the underlying motivations fuelling this iteration of homophobia and transphobia. It is essential to consider whether this panic serves as a strategic diversion from other political and economic issues or, more profoundly, highlights unresolved societal tensions. Such tensions lie between the drive for equality and inclusion and the reactionary defence of traditional power hierarchies and inequalities by those feeling besieged by societal transformation. This dissection of the underlying causes of the current moral panic is crucial, as it reveals the foundational issues at play – issues that are not just about RSE content but about broader shifts in social power dynamics. By placing the present panic in a historical context and comparing it to past instances, this paper sheds light on the unique significance of today's moral panic. It underscores the need for a discourse rooted in evidence, showcasing how media narratives, the actions of moral entrepreneurs, and responses from agents of social control collectively mould societal perceptions and legislative responses to the evolving demands of an inclusive educational framework.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the moral panic surrounding RSE curriculum changes underscores the necessity for a measured approach that integrates factual accuracy and inclusivity. Political affirmation and the influence of online platforms have exacerbated societal anxieties, emphasising the urgency of combatting misinformation and amplifying marginalised perspectives. To address these challenges, advocating for an educational framework fostering inclusivity, critical thinking, and resilience against misinformation is paramount. Recognising the diverse experiences of those affected by moral panics, particularly at the intersections of marginalised identities, is crucial. By fostering empathy and understanding, promoting constructive dialogue, and embracing evidence-based policies, we can shape a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape. Ultimately, by addressing the root causes of moral panics and prioritising evidence over alarmism, we can strive towards a society in which RSE promotes understanding, acceptance, and respect for all.

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ORCID

Heather Marshall  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6607-3910>

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