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“The professional side of it”: exploring discomfort in delivering RSE in an Independent Boarding School in England

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ABSTRACT

Teachers in Lady Agatha’s Boarding School (Lady Agatha’s) find teaching Sex and Relationships Education (RSE) uncomfortable. This paper investigates one aspect of the discomfort that they feel, namely the impact RSE has on their professional status as teachers. I use focus group data to reflect on the professional and personal location of teachers at Lady Agatha’s and to explore their understanding of RSE through the recurring themes of professionalism and professional reputation as symbolic capital; deprofessionalisation and risk as symbolic violence; and the connects and disconnects between the *doxa* and *illusio* of the school. Findings suggest that by interrogating the sites of symbolic violence which generate RSE discomfort, we can start to unpick the fabric which creates discomfort about RSE, allowing both for a deeper understanding of RSE discomfort in teachers and an opportunity to address this discomfort as a barrier to RSE delivery at Lady Agatha’s.

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Introduction

This paper derives from a small-scale investigation using Bourdieu’s field theory, in an independent school setting. Lady Agatha’s Boarding School (a pseudonym hereafter referred to as Lady Agatha’s) is a small co-educational independent boarding school on the south coast of England. The experiences shared in this study speak to a disconnect between the RSE policy reform (DfE 2021) and the discomfort of teachers as the policy becomes enacted. The research was conducted as part of a doctoral study investigating the implementation of the 2020 Relationships and Sex Education policy in England¹ from the perspective of an independent boarding school. In the UK, independent schools are fee paying institutions that are educationally separate from the state, but still regulated by national frameworks of quality assurance and inspection. They do not have to follow national curricula. In this way, independent schools are set apart from state schools, because on the whole, they have more influence over how national policies are enacted within them. One exception to this is in the implementation of the Relationships and Sex Education framework.

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Independent schools in England are relatively under-researched (Lingard et al. 2012), and although there is excellent international research considering sexuality education (RSE) in independent schools (e.g. Charles and Allan 2022) from an international perspective, RSE in English independent schools requires further investigation. This paper contributes to the wider literature surrounding the discomfort teachers feel in delivering RSE, while adding to the relative paucity of studies focusing on RSE in English independent schools. I do not suggest here that the feelings of discomfort in delivering RSE in independent schools differ from feelings of discomfort in state schools. However, because RSE is one of the few instances where the state imposes a framework on independent schools in England, it does present as unusual.

Moreover, the wider academic literature regarding the RSE reforms in England contains little exploration of the factors affecting resistance from teachers to delivering RSE within an English independent boarding school setting such as Lady Agatha's. This is surprising as there are at least 468 independent boarding schools in England (see https://www.boarding.org.uk/member_type/full-uk/). The consequences of not having research engaging directly with the voice of those who deliver RSE could be far-reaching. This silence could reduce the efficacy and increase the cost (both economic and human) of any policy enactment. Without listening to the experiences and positionality of teachers of RSE, or considering the field itself, it is impossible to develop an understanding of the barriers between those delivering RSE and good-quality provision. This paper is timely as research for the National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) has shown that 46% of their members do not feel comfortable or confident with RSE delivery (NASUWT 2022). These findings align with the work of Meiksin et al. (2020), who found amongst barriers to the delivery of RSE, teacher comfort and willingness to deliver RSE were prominent.

The literature considering RSE within English independent boarding schools at the secondary level remains limited, with Lingard et al. (2012) suggesting that this may be a wider issue regarding researchers access to independent institutions. Existing studies, for example, Charles and Allan (2022), consider independent school students experiences internationally to argue that RSE curricula are located within a complex matrix of competing arguments. Amongst these, are national debates surrounding content, and institutional debates surrounding the interpretation of national frameworks (Magnússon, Göransson, and Lindqvist 2019). RSE curricula are not neutral, they are political and ideological, framed within the pedagogical practices of teachers conveying what the individual teacher values, and nested within the value structures of the institution and the state, which again sits within a larger series of societal networks. RSE thereby becomes a reflection of political struggles between what constitutes knowledge, what knowledge is considered appropriate or valuable, and what is (and is not) discussed within school – with both absence and presence carrying value-laden messages (Fairclough 2013)

Teachers who deliver RSE are often expected to do more than simply provide sexual health, or biomechanical information (Cohen, Byers, and Sears 2012). Secondary schools are spaces where sexuality is constantly being expressed, defined, redefined and manifested; and where students project feelings of intimacy, discuss their physical, emotional, and sexual development, and exchange information with each other about sexuality and relationships (Gerouki 2011). Thus, within the secondary school, there is an increased opportunity for students to seek information regarding consent, abortion, sexual violence,

masturbation, LGBTQIA+, pornography, pleasure, love and more. This litters RSE with multiple sites of discomfort (Wood et al. 2019), leading to potential resistance from teachers tasked to deliver it. To avoid this discomfort, RSE teachers and curriculum managers often seek to prioritise less contentious biological factors and risk, over autonomy and pleasure (Preston 2019). Another common response to feelings of discomfort is to adopt a position of inaction within the classroom. This has the potential to silence debate and student exploration – or prevent adequate challenges to damaging viewpoints (Page 2017), constructing the hidden curriculum (Watson 2005).

Allen (2014) found that teachers who deliver sexuality education acknowledge discomfort, in terms of professional practice and persona. Such professional discomfort is linked to the professional status of colleagues delivering RSE (Alldred, David, and Smith 2003). The literature also suggests that this discomfort can emanate from concerns surrounding professional integrity (Preston 2019). The RSE teacher-student relationship is different from that between the teacher-student of mathematics, and differentiates the delivery of RSE lessons from that of more traditional curricula. Such differences include the incorporation of vernacular terminology, and discussion of topics with a deep personal connection to the individual. No matter how enthusiastic the student of mathematics may be, they will not feel the same level of intimacy or personal investment in discussing trigonometry as they will when discussing pornography. The relationship between the student-of-RSE and the teacher-of-RSE is also different to that between the student-of-mathematics and the teacher-of-mathematics, in that the former creates opportunities for students to share information that they would not share with other adults, to express vulnerabilities that they would not express in other classrooms, to talk in ways that would be inappropriate in other curricular spaces. This is often discomfiting for teachers, because as Gerouki (2011) commented teachers frequently deny their sexual selves, shielding the person-as-teacher behind the expectations of the profession. Such everyday denial of the sexual self is doubly discomfiting for teachers of RSE, as it is also coupled with the possibility of being accused of forming sexual relationships with students (Wood et al. 2019).

Discomfort felt by the practitioner from the imagined impropriety that the inclusion of sexual knowledge could create (Wood et al. 2019) may have its origins in moral panics regarding childhood innocence (Blaise 2013). Childhood innocence as a social-moral construct (Robinson 2008) enshrines sexuality as the realm of the adult, where adults determine how children should behave, what the child should know, and how they should come to know it (Davies and Robinson 2010). In line with such a perspective, adults hold the ownership of sexual knowledge and experience, and children are considered asexual (Kehily 2002; Robinson 2008), and unknowing.

RSE within schools remains a controversial topic, particularly among conservatives (Smith and Attwood 2011) and some religious groups (McGinn et al. 2016), concerned that RSE programmes could root in the minds of the innocent child, sexual thoughts which lead to early sexual experimentation (TCI 2020), risk (Meyer 2007), and violence (Papadopoulos 2010). Although critiqued by post-structuralists (Butler 1990), the normalisation of sexuality as an adult-only matter has assisted in the obsession with maintaining and controlling children's sexuality and sexual curiosity, leading to a perception that developing the sexual knowledge of children risks exploitation, which permeates RSE (Davies and Robinson 2010; Faulkner 2010). This heightened state of alert locates RSE practitioners in a space where they may be

perceived as having the ability to corrupt the innocence of children, and risk harming them. Such a space could conceivably be labelled as discomfort.

Theoretical framing

Bourdieu's theory of the social field provides an opportunity to investigate the social features and actions within a school, and the way in which social policy permeates the working practices of teachers (Grenfell and James 2004). This paper uses the work of Bourdieu to understand the link between the teacher, and the social framework of Lady Agatha's. In doing so, it considers Lady Agatha's as a *field*, secondary education as secondary field, and RSE as a sub-field of the larger field of secondary education. Here, the concept of field designates a specific social space that integrates the *habitus* of the agents operating within it: habitus being the complex matrix of ideas, experiences and emotions, as well as biological and psychological characteristics, that make an individual disposed to think, feel and act in particular ways, in particular fields, within a given situation in a given time (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Habitus is intimately linked to the social history of an individual or groups of individuals in a particular social space over time. A teacher's habitus generates practices in response to the field they find themselves in, with those responses having meaning and significance in relation to the social contexts relevant to their origin.

I also engage with the concept of *illusio*, which refers to an investment in 'the game'. Illusio is an unconscious willingness to abide by the unwritten taken for granted rules, or *status quo* of the field. Illusio is a force that enables practice by articulating habitus within a field, by expressing the commitment of agents within a field to invest in the stakes of the game or field (Colley and Guéry 2015), thereby reproducing the structure of power relations within and across fields. Distinct from illusio as an investment in the game, *doxa* is a belief in how things should be, or the dominant version of 'taken for granted' assumptions and unquestionable truths (Kloot 2009). These assumptions relate to the value assigned to the capital held, the rules of the game, and the shape and size of the field. Doxa is not equally shared amongst actors. It is a particular point of view, the view of the dominant actors within the field, which imposes itself as the universal point of view (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), making it a generative and enforced form of power.

Within the field, through the action and interaction of habitus, doxa and illusio, social activity becomes a game played to secure domination over forms of capital. Capital is a form of power, which is affective within a specific field (Kloot 2009). The struggle over capital, however, is not just over one specific type of capital, but the struggle over the dominance of specific types of capital within that field. In other words, within a field there will be a range of objects that have become capital, and the struggle of actors within the field is not just over the accumulation of one type of capital, but it is also the struggle to make the capital possessed more dominant than the capital that is not possessed. Therefore, the struggle for capital becomes a struggle for symbolic power and a right to dominate and determine what is legitimate within the field (Baroutsis 2015). Capital becomes the objects and instruments of this struggle. Bourdieu terms this struggle as one of *symbolic violence*. Symbolic violence secures an agent's compliance to the fields' domination through the shaping of beliefs, actions or practices associated with the exclusion of other beliefs, actions

and practices by efforts to consider them as illegitimate (Baroutsis 2015). Symbolic violence is often imperceptible and invisible, it is exerted through symbolic channels of communication and cognition occurring in contexts where power is accepted as legitimate.

Together, these Bourdieusian tools (of field, habitus, capital, symbolic violence, *illusio* and *doxa*) will help me to unpick social structures and established 'norms' within Lady Agatha's, to better understand the relationships and interconnections between the teacher of RSE and Lady Agatha's as an institution or field. This will allow me to uncover power relations that generate or fuel (or in Bourdieusian terms 'produce' and 'reproduce') discomfort in RSE as part of the orthodoxy of the teachers' lived experience. This approach allows me to reconceptualise teacher resistance to the delivery of RSE within a proper sociological framework and provides a novel way of discussing how discomfort is felt and constructed by an institution or field (in this instance Lady Agatha's), as well as through the individual via the construction of the habitus.

Methods

Data for this study were generated through focus groups. Focus groups were chosen because they allow a display of both an individual perspective and its place within a wider whole as an expression of shared experience (Frith 2000). They can highlight the complex ways habitus informs discourse surrounding RSE (Powell and Single 1996) by providing a reflective space for participants to question their own views in a social process of collective sense-making (Wilkinson 1998). Focus groups also allow a reciprocal sharing of information which has been shown to allow uninhibited discussion on sensitive topics (Frith 2000) such as sex/uality (Ramseyer-Winter, Gillen, and Kennedy 2018). Participants were sought from RSE teachers at Lady Agatha's. The opportunity to participate in a focus group was initially advertised school wide, but then followed up by personal invitation to those teachers who had RSE on their timetable.

The Focus group that forms the basis for this paper was recorded and started with a vignette from the film *Mean Girls* (Waters 2004), showing a fraught physical education teacher attempting to deliver RSE. The clip portrays the discomfort of a non-specialist RSE teacher, as well as the heteronormative and inaccurate medical-health risk-centred approach to RSE common within the literature. The vignette was used to stimulate discussion regarding the nature and origin of this discomfort. The group was encouraged to discuss their experiences as RSE teachers, as members of Lady Agatha's as field, and as individuals. The recordings were transcribed verbatim and both the transcripts and recordings were systematically analysed using constant comparative method (Glaser 2014). Open or initial coding was employed to break down the transcript data into discrete parts to allow examination for and exploration of similarities and differences, this developed into second cycle concept coding (Saldaña 2021). Themes were recognised when commonalities occurred and when language use intersected. When ideas and ideals were discussed, they were grouped together and coded (Wilkinson 1998). Data were then compared to existing theory allowing for a sharpened understanding of the themes and the defining characteristics of the whole case, providing a thick description of the situation (Cronin 2014).

Ethics approval for this research was granted by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Portsmouth (Approval number: FHSS 2019–050).

Participants and context

Because this paper uses the stories of colleagues at Lady Agatha's, their experiences and understanding of delivering RSE, to make their voices heard as clearly as possible introductions are needed. Although pseudonyms are used, their location within Lady Agatha's as field are first described.

Rupert's subject specialism was biology, and teaching was his second career. Rupert had been working at Lady Agatha's for four years at the time of the study and had RSE on his teaching timetable each year. LABS was Rupert's fourth school. Clementine was a subject leader within the arts. She had delivered RSE for the past two years and had been a member of the Lady Agatha's Common Room for five years. Lady Agatha's was Clementine's second school. Archibald was an early-career teacher, he had worked as a Head of Year 11 for one year and had been teaching for four years. Archibald's subject specialisms were physical education and mathematics. Gwen was the Head of Year 7 whose subject specialism was English. Gwen had worked in three schools and at Lady Agatha's for the last 3 years. Pippa had worked at Lady Agatha's for 7 years, her subject specialisms were physical education and biology.

The delivery of RSE at Lady Agatha's, like that at many other independent secondary schools in England, took place under the rubric of Physical Social Health Education (PSHE) under the Education Regulations 2014² (Independent School Standards). At Lady Agatha's, teachers delivered PSHE every week to mixed ability, mixed gender classes. PSHE covered a range of topics, including citizenship, anti-bullying and RSE. PSHE was a timetabled session and Lady Agatha's addressed it to the same extent as any other curriculum subject. PSHE was placed on colleagues' timetables by the deputy headteacher, who constructed the teaching timetables for all colleagues. PSHE was allocated to teachers initially based on timetable capacity. There were, however, caveats to this, for example, colleagues who had a specific agreement with the headmistress (negotiated as part of their contract) did not deliver PSHE, neither did those who had arranged with the deputy headteacher to deliver other aspects of the wider curriculum, such as sports or an after-school society.

If there were unallocated PSHE sessions, then it was standard practice to allocate PSHE to newer colleagues first. Colleagues delivering PSHE were expected to do so in the same way they would do for a mathematics lesson (in other words plan/differentiate, resource and deliver the session). Teacher-led sessions were complemented three times a year by 'drop-down-days', where the curriculum was suspended, and external facilitators were invited to deliver sessions.

Findings and analysis

Can I pass straight to the deep end with the professional side of it.

Archibald's statement above highlights a theme which ran throughout the focus groups, identifying professional status as being core to teacher identity. However, it also identifies the

core of the discomfort which colleagues expressed, with professionalism acting as a species of symbolic capital (Noordegraaf and Schinkel 2011), and de-professionalisation as a site of symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). For example, Clementine in the same focus group said,

... what a pain in the ass I've got RSE on my timetable, that is annoying, I'm not a RSE teacher, that's not my job to deliver'.

Here, Clementine associates discomfort ('pain') with de-professionalisation ('not my job'). Why would this be the case? I pressed further. Archibald stated unequivocally:

... without a doubt, the other academic subjects are higher status'.

Rupert expanded on this in reference to the initial vignette:

... like that scene very much identifies ... how it's being approached in schools at the moment, it's an afterthought dumped on someone. I think is it always going to be a losing battle, when RSE lessons are ... viewed as a, not even as a second subject.

Teachers at Lady Agatha's considered RSE as a low-status part of their timetable. Rupert argued that RSE had lower symbolic capital value than a more traditional curriculum subject such as chemistry (Bragg et al. 2022). The low value was demonstrated by being 'dumped on', and an 'afterthought'. Teaching RSE was seen as an encumbrance rather than a sought-after addition to the teachers' workload. Such a finding is in line with research by Alldred, David, and Smith (2003) who found that the 'official' role of the subject teacher conflicted with a seemingly less 'official' role of RSE teacher. Both Rupert and Clementine saw the presence of RSE as a burden, going so far as to say it was 'not even' a second subject. Although it was not uncommon for colleagues at Lady Agatha's to teach a second subject, doing so was often a choice and something colleagues did as part of their professional development. Second subjects were ordinarily only delivered by colleagues whose principal specialism was perceived as not academic enough by the Common Room.³ In this school, the supplementary inclusion of a second subject was seen as providing legitimacy to an individual's status as 'true teacher'. By adding an 'academic' specialism, more capital was assigned to them.

This could be seen in the case of Pippa and Archibald, both of whom had chosen to develop their teacher selves by adding a 'core' academic specialism to their repertoire. The addition of a core subject specialism transforms a teacher of physical education into a teacher of mathematics and physical education. By actively seeking out second (more academic) subjects to accumulate symbolic capital, Pippa and Archibald were investing in the game of the Common Room. They were also strengthening the *illusio* of the field by investing in their professional status. Their actions also strengthened the *doxa* within the field, reproducing the taken for granted, unwritten rule that teachers with less academic specialisms require a more academic specialism in order to be seen as legitimate teachers at Lady Agatha's (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990).

Having discussed RSE in terms of de-professionalisation within the field, it is useful to turn to the discomfort felt by the focus group as located in the risks associated with RSE delivery, whereby the practitioner stakes their professional reputation (or the sum of their

symbolic capital), in a game in which the boundaries (doxa) are unstable. Consider the following exchange:

Rupert: ... was it Clause 4 or Clause 28 or something back in the late 80s

Gwen: ... I remember that being a big thing when I started teaching.

Rupert: And now suddenly we are promoting, like back then suddenly we were promoting, well we weren't but you know, but the teachers were promoting homosexuality and gay and blah, blah, blah, and it was a big old hoo-ha, wasn't it, and I remember feeling uncomfortable about it at the time, and 30 years later it's still being something that resonates

Researcher: So, Section 28 still has a big impact on the comfort of teachers delivering RSE?

Rupert: I genuinely do, ...

Gwen: It's a really interesting point Rupert, I hadn't considered that, I was like, those days are behind us, forward we move, how repulsive, but actually yeah, you're right, there might be some kind of residual uncertainty, like this is right now – what's going to be right later?

Section 28 (S28) of the 1988 Local Government Act sought to prevent local authorities from the 'intentional promotion of homosexuality' and promoting the 'teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship' (Lee 2019). S28 generated legal uncertainty around LGBTQIA+ discourses in schools, and prevented the normalisation of homosexuality by removing any school activity which suggested that homosexuality was acceptable (Valentine, Butler, and Skelton 2001). Here, Rupert and Gwen highlight the shifting nature of LGBTQIA+ issues as part of RSE: they describe the power and influence of S28, and how this left a lasting impression on the field. Undeniably, S28 was a 'big thing': it has an enduring legacy in the doxa of the field, and as Rupert describes above, '30 years later it's still being something that resonates'.

The move away from S28 in 2003 to a policy of recognition, inclusion and diversity that is present in the current RSE framework represents a major change in the rules of the game. This shift in doxa is felt particularly acutely by teachers who started work before 2003, because they have experienced the change from homosexuality in schools being linked firmly to immorality and illegality (Chambers, van Loon, and Tincknell 2004) to the inclusivity contained within the new RSE guidance. For them, such a shift provides a degree of uncertainty regarding the stability of the doxa of the field, as Gwen pointed out,

there might be some kind of residual uncertainty, like this is right now - what's going to be right later?

The arguments made regarding S28, and the promotion of non-heteronormative sexual activity, are reflective of the discomfort focus group members expressed regarding other aspects of RSE. Archibald mentioned this in relation to inclusion of discussion of pornography as part of the curriculum:

because I think they [students] don't know about it, I think they're [teachers] worried about the repercussions of what they [teachers] say because ... we talked to them about porn at school [so] are we not encouraging them to go and watch it?

Here, Archibald fears that the inclusion of pornography as part of RSE could serve to encourage some students to engage with it. His discomfort also hints at the surveillance and regulation of teachers work informed by moral imperatives (Page 2017). This surveillance is legislated for through policy documents such as *Keeping Children Safe in Education* (DfE 2022), and the *Independent School Standards* (DfE 2019). In both of these documents, the safeguarding of children is considered paramount, requiring all schools to have mechanisms to report the conduct of anyone who may pose a risk of harm to children. Furthermore, colleagues who transgress standards of personal and professional conduct (DfE 2012) can find themselves reported for misconduct to the Teacher Regulation Agency (TRA 2014) which has the power to prohibit them from teaching. It is little wonder that teachers are ‘worried about the repercussions of what they say’, because those who are perceived as transgressing the bounds of professional relationships risk accusations of unprofessionalism or even sexual impropriety.

Although false or malicious accusations of abuse regarding teachers are rare (O’Donohue, Cummings, and Willis 2018), the high levels of surveillance that teachers experience, and the highly regulated frameworks that exist governing teacher conduct, provide an environment that is not dissimilar to the moral scrutiny described by Rasmussen (2004) some 15 years ago. Archibald further detailed his discomfort relating to the inclusion of discussion about pornography as part of RSE as follows:

I think the view point of porn in the world is that it’s not professional, it’s not spoken about, some people are very open to it but that’s a minority of people, and I can imagine there’s quite a few members of staff at Lady Agatha’s who if you told them they had to teach and talk to kids about porn, you would see them probably shudder in fear and go white because it would just be horrendous!

This statement regarding how professional it was to discuss pornography reflected Archibald’s discomfort emanating from safeguarding concerns, in that the inclusion of pornography in RSE could risk (if not encourage or promote) exposure to sexually explicit material:

... and then you got concerns of what it is out on the Internet and what porn websites can lead to, and the further in and around in those sites and the access to other places you know ... Are they then accessing the world that goes deeper and darker and things like the dark web you know? I think there’s such a massive avenue in - and I think the problem is that stuff like porn because it’s technology based and I feel - and questionably I think probably most kids at Lady Agatha’s are better on technology than the staff stood in front of them.

Here Archibald identifies discomfort as emanating from three sites, all of which are linked to overarching themes of child protection and risks to professional integrity. Firstly, ‘most kids at Lady Agatha’s are better on technology than the staff’. Archibald believes that colleagues work in a space where teacher’s knowledge can be felt as lesser than that of the student. This imbalance in who holds the knowledge that matters leads to feelings of de-professionalisation (Kehily 2002). This imbalance also gives rise to discomfort via symbolic violence, because the teacher has a reduced amount of symbolic capital (knowledge), while the student has a greater amount of symbolic capital (knowledge). In addition to the shift in symbolic capital, the boundaries of the game (or doxa) have shifted. This happens when the dominant (teacher) within the field become the dominated. Such an imbalance is keenly felt in Archibald’s pedagogy and generates feelings of

discomfort as the student becomes the predominant holder of the symbolic capital (knowledge). This changes the rules of the game: namely, that students are taught and teachers teach, and that teachers hold the knowledge and students receive it.

The second area of discomfort relates to what discussion of pornographic websites could 'lead further' to – namely, exposure to sexually explicit, misogynistic and violent content. Archibald saw discussion of pornography as part of RSE that might lead to potentially extreme and damaging consequences, or what Spišák (2016) has termed imagined dangers. This, discomfort emanates from the personal responsibility Archibald felt for the safety of students, and thus his fear of harming children (Bray 2008) through exposure to online abuse or exploitation. This actions seem driven by the desire to protect childhood innocence (Spišák and Paasonen 2017). Themes of protection of childhood innocence (Egan and Hawkes 2007; McGinn et al. 2016), ownership and control over sexual knowledge (Foucault 1990), and calls for the protection of innocence and asexuality at all costs, position the boundary between the innocent child and the knowing adult as linked to sexual awareness and exposure (Charles 2013; Renold and Ringrose 2011).

The third site of discomfort relates to taking responsibility for the risk of failure (Quinlivan 2018) while attempting to protect the innocent child from exposure to dangerous and unrestricted material. It does this by legitimising and encouraging, or as Pippa put it, 'enabling' children to explore an occult space – namely, Archibald's 'dark web'. In such spaces, the innocent child might unwittingly (but encouraged by the normalisation processes of the teacher) enter into a space of danger.

Discomfort from teachers in the focus group regarding the social, legal and moral correctness of teaching about pornography as part of RSE was as prominent as the risk of harm to students. This was demonstrated in one exchange between Pippa and Archibald:

Pippa: ... there might be a moral question there, they're like this is ridiculous, why on earth am I teaching this, I'm enabling ... And the second thing is they're worried the kids are going to turn around and go like, 'Oh, is this what you like miss, is this what you want you know, is this a personal recommendation?' and that's it, they're worried they're going to lose the room and that's what they're going to be known for ... , in terms of professional reputation, and might feel they can't come back from that.

Archibald: I get that, you're Mister Porn and that could last forever.

Here, the discomfort teachers felt is interwoven with the fabric of teachers' professional reputation. Professional reputation relies on the accumulation of high value symbolic capital. Yet, symbolic capital is also connected to standards of behaviour that are consistent with the field's perception of professional conduct, and adherence to social norms and values. Therefore, reputation is based on more than skills and knowledge; reputation has an ethical dimension too. A teacher can improve on performance by developing skills and knowledge; they can take on additional 'academic' specialisms, but it is difficult for a teacher to recover from a moral *faux pas* – such as indicating that they engage with pornography and giving 'personal recommendation[s]' about it.

But Pippa also fears 'losing the room', referring to how a teacher seeks to manage the behaviour of children. Their success in doing so is linked to the symbolic capital a teacher holds within the school. Being able to hold the room has high capital value and is a cornerstone of professional standing and reputation of the teacher at Lady Agatha's. If this capital is reduced, or the teacher experiences an act of symbolic

violence such that they become known as Mr Porn rather than the history teacher, there is an incompatibility between the high value symbolic capital of professional reputation, and the new reputation conferred upon them by students. At that moment, there is a shift in the rules of the game and students take control over the positioning of the teacher within the field. In such a way, the doxa of an already unstable field changes in real time, acting as a form of viscerally felt symbolic violence, which in turn challenges the teacher's sense of *illusio*.

Pippa provided an example of an imagined teacher faced with such a stark shift in doxa:

Some people ask a question about being pansexual but that's not on the spec. until next week so you haven't read those notes, I think a lot of people wouldn't have the confidence to be able to ping back those answers, I think once you do that you kind of become a little bit more defensive about how you're answering questions and that is a barrier.

Here Pippa constructs an imagined teacher, who, being under prepared for a question, becomes defensive and constructs barriers to the students questioning. This is a common agentic strategy employed by recently qualified teachers (Sullivan et al. 2014), whereby an attempt is made to shut down awkward questions. The danger with this approach is, Pippa suggests:

... that kind of then comes back in the room because the kids maybe won't feel that they can ask those questions or the question they ask was like correct, and again that comes with its own stigma within the peer group as well.

In addition to shutting down questions that do not align with the habitus of the teacher, doxa is mediated in other more subtle ways. In this instance, it influences reputation (or as Pippa puts it 'stigma'), by creating a persona that won't answer 'those [type of] questions'.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to contribute to wider discourses of RSE in England by considering the interplay between habitus, doxa, and *illusio* regarding RSE. I have shown how symbolic capital distribution and symbolic violence within Lady Agatha's school, create a self-reproducing state of heteronormative sexual repression in which children are considered the innocent receivers of knowledge from teachers, and where the sexual self is seen to be directly influenced by RSE. The focus group discussions suggest that Lady Agatha's operates as space of self-imposed sexual regulation (Ringrose and Renold 2012) by producing and reproducing (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) signalling which suggests only certain kinds of teacher are willing to openly engage in RSE. This space has constructed a doxa in which an absence of sexuality or sexual exploration amongst children becomes part of the taken for granted 'truth' (for adults) of what being a student at Lady Agatha's is all about. As a result, doxa becomes a manifest version of heteronormative sexual virtue (Chambers, van Loon, and Tincknell 2004), in which age-appropriate sexual behaviour is scrutinised through a lens of morality and imagined dangers, as well as through the very real risks associated with safeguarding and child protection legislation.

Throughout this study, focus group members felt discomfort in teaching RSE because doing so exposed themselves to the risk of symbolic violence. This symbolic violence

exists where amounts and types of symbolic capital shift within the field. Within Lady Agatha's, this was prominent where there is a change in the interplay between teacher-as-actor and child-as-actor – for example, the professional nature of teacher-of-mathematics and student-of-mathematics, contrasted with the teacher-of-RSE and student-of-RSE – or when knowledge as a type of symbolic capital was weighted towards the student rather than towards the teacher. Additionally, there were risks to professional reputation in attempting to deliver RSE while operating within a culture of surveillance. For example, when discussing pornography with students, Archibald felt at risk of corrupting the 'innocent child' by promoting student exploration of unsafe spaces (the dark web) and media (sexually explicit material), thereby offering a construction of himself as the 'knowing adult'.

Teachers at Lady Agatha's therefore find themselves in the uncomfortable position of being intermediaries: under pressure from students (to explore and understand their emerging sexuality and gender identities), government policies and legislative frameworks, and the doxa of the field regarding professional status within the school. Teachers, who find themselves in this discomfiting space reduce opportunities for students to explore their own sexual and gender identity, leading to the inculcation of students into the dominant and established doxa of Lady Agatha's.

By recognising discomfort as a specific barrier to the delivery of RSE in one school, I have extended the work of Lodge, Duffy, and Feeney (2022) to consider how the social fabric of an educational space (Lady Agatha's) can lead to discomfort. By understanding that teacher discomfort in teaching RSE discomfort is generated at sites of symbolic violence, we can start to unpick the fabric which has constructed these barriers. This allows for a deeper understanding of these barriers to delivering RSE in schools, as well as providing opportunities to address and eventually deconstruct these blockages.

Like all studies, however, this one has its limitations. It would clearly be unwise to generalise from this one close-focus study in an Independent school involving a small group of teachers to a wider context. Further research in a variety of different schools is needed.

Additionally, and just as importantly, further research is required to investigate the impact of continuing professional development (CPD) and initial teacher training (ITT) on both the habitus of individual teachers, and the reproduction of doxa and *illusio* within individual schools, as well as nationally. Such research could help reduce the discomfort teachers feel in the delivery of RSE by challenging established social norms such as the residual power of S28, and professional norms such as the weight knowledge has as a type of symbolic capital within the pedagogies of trainee teachers.

Notes

1. The Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) policy is statutory guidance issued by the Department for Education. It was initially published in 2019 but replaced in full in 2020. It is the first sex and relationships statutory guidance issued in England since 1999 and moves the focus of RSE away from teenage pregnancy, towards inclusive relationship and sex education. As statutory guidance it is applicable in and across all schools in England and Wales.
2. In the 2014 regulations, the term Social Moral Spiritual and Cultural (SMSC) education is used. However, PSHE (Physical Social Health and Education) is a more common term because it

aligns with the description given by professional bodies such as the PSHE Association, and other terminology used in government guidance.

3. The Common Room is a standard term in independent schools. It describes all the teaching staff in the school, and comprises the main body of actors within the field. It becomes the mechanism that determines capital values and, in this instance, the value attached to specific subjects.

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