

Article

“For Sustained Change, We Need Everyone on Board”: Australian Outsourced Provider Perspectives on Relationships and Sexuality Education for Young People

Sarah Vrankovich ^{1,2} , Gemma Hamilton ^{1,*}  and Anastasia Powell ¹

¹ School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University, Melbourne, VIC 3001, Australia; vrankovich.sarah@outlook.com (S.V.); anastasia.powell@rmit.edu.au (A.P.)

² Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, Melbourne, VIC 3086, Australia

* Correspondence: gemma.hamilton@rmit.edu.au

Abstract: (1) Schools often rely on outsourced providers to deliver relationships and sexuality education (RSE) to young people. However, there is limited research that has focused on outsourced provider practices and perceptions of RSE, particularly as it relates to sexual violence prevention. (2) The current qualitative study interviewed 15 outsourced providers in Australia to glean their perspectives on the effective features of, and barriers to the implementation of, RSE for young people, with a focus on sexual violence prevention. (3) Through a reflexive thematic analysis, we found that outsourced providers valued a whole-of-school approach to RSE and advocated for content on pornography literacy. They raised conservative gatekeeping, precarious funding, and limited time as key implementation barriers. The findings also highlighted inconsistent views and approaches to RSE among outsourced providers, with questions surrounding who should deliver RSE, which theoretical framework underpins their work, and whether to take a gendered approach. (4) Implications for educators, policymakers, and young people are discussed.

Keywords: relationships and sexuality education; sexual violence prevention; outsourced provider; consent education



Academic Editor: Todd Michael Franke

Received: 29 September 2024

Revised: 21 January 2025

Accepted: 24 January 2025

Published: 6 February 2025

Citation: Vrankovich, S., Hamilton, G., & Powell, A. (2025). “For Sustained Change, We Need Everyone on Board”: Australian Outsourced Provider Perspectives on Relationships and Sexuality Education for Young People. *Youth*, 5(1), 14. <https://doi.org/10.3390/youth5010014>

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1. Introduction

Australian statistics show that over one third (39.5%) of young people have experienced some form of unwanted sex in their lifetime (Power et al., 2022). Such experiences can include those that are unwanted but acquiesced, through to pressured experiences, as well as coercion and forced sex—what Liz Kelly has influentially described as the continuum of sexual violence (Kelly, 1987). To address this issue, various primary, secondary, and tertiary initiatives must work together to prevent sexual violence among young people (Hooker et al., 2021; McMahon, 2000). One primary prevention strategy that seeks to address sexual violence before it occurs is the implementation of relationships and sexuality education (RSE). Various initiatives, such as the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032, recognize RSE as an important strategy for preventing sexual violence among young people (Australian Government Department of Social Services, 2022).

The objective of RSE programs is to equip young people with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values necessary to enhance their sexual health and wellbeing (UNESCO, 2018). These programs aim to facilitate the development of respectful social and sexual relationships, nurture healthy and positive attitudes towards bodies, puberty, relationships, sex, and family life, encourage critical reflection on the consequences of choices for

themselves and others, and empower individuals to understand and advocate for their rights throughout their lives (UNESCO, 2018). Indeed, several systematic reviews have identified the effectiveness of RSE in improving young people's knowledge, attitudes, and skills related to sexual health and sexual wellbeing (see Burton et al., 2023; Garzón-Orjuela et al., 2021; Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021; Lameiras-Fernández et al., 2021). These reviews consistently find that programs commencing in the early foundational years of schooling can gradually introduce developmentally appropriate content, embrace diverse identities, and emphasize skill-building, which has a positive impact on young people's attitudes, knowledge, and skills related to sexual health and wellbeing. These learnings can serve as a protective factor against sexual violence by equipping young people with the tools needed to make informed decisions about and critically reflect on their sexual preferences and desires (Schneider & Hirsch, 2020).

Research has long established that to be an effective sexual violence primary prevention strategy, RSE must affirm young people's human right to accurate information, freedom from discrimination, and informed decision-making (Berglas et al., 2014; Campbell, 2016; Gruskin et al., 2019; Kismödi et al., 2017). Despite its potential, global research consistently shows that young people are often disappointed in their RSE, describing it as insufficient in meeting their needs, lacking in critical content such as personal wellbeing, and being heavily focused on risk and harm prevention (e.g., Díaz-Rodríguez et al., 2024; Vrankovich et al., 2024; Graham et al., 2023). Additionally, much of the existing RSE literature has focused on teacher perspectives, highlighting persistent challenges such as inadequate training, insufficient resources, and discomfort in addressing sensitive topics (Burns et al., 2023; Crumper et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2014; Lodge et al., 2022; Ollis, 2016; Walker et al., 2021). To ameliorate some of these challenges, schools can contract outsourced providers to deliver RSE to students and/or upskill staff to engage with this content (Burns & Hendriks, 2018; Goldman, 2011). However, there is limited scholarly knowledge on outsourced provider perspectives regarding good practice in RSE. This study aimed to address this gap by focusing on the perspectives of outsourced RSE providers, whose specialized knowledge and experiences are critical for informing best practices in sexual violence prevention among young people.

1.1. Outsourced Provider Perspectives of Relationships and Sexuality Education

Some international research has explored outsourced provider perspectives on effective RSE (Beres, 2019; Black et al., 2024; Pound et al., 2017). For instance, one study in the United Kingdom involved a one-day workshop with 19 experts and practitioners engaged in RSE (Pound et al., 2017). The workshop sought participants' feedback on an evidence-based RSE program in the UK, as well as their views on key issues such as effective approaches to RSE and responsibility for its delivery. While the data from this workshop were not analyzed or treated as formal research data, the findings provided insights into perceived evidence gaps and stakeholder priorities. Participants emphasized the importance of moving beyond harm and risk-focused approaches, advocating instead for comprehensive RSE that addresses sexual health and relationships. They also highlighted the critical role of teachers in delivering RSE, noting that although outsourced providers bring valuable expertise, their sporadic sessions may undermine the consistency and effectiveness of RSE (Pound et al., 2017). Other research with high school teachers and students echoes these concerns, suggesting that schools may sometimes outsource RSE as a 'tick the box' exercise to appease parental and public expectations rather than prioritizing best practice (Hayes et al., 2024).

Australian research on outsourced provider perspectives of RSE is also in its infancy (Crocker et al., 2019; Heslop et al., 2020; Waling et al., 2023; Walker et al., 2023). One recent

qualitative study explored the perspectives of Victorian health professionals (such as nurses and general practitioners) who encountered sexual and reproductive health-related issues in their practice ($n = 12$) (Walker et al., 2023). The participants perceived health professionals and outsourced providers with expertise in the field as best placed to deliver RSE. They acknowledged that a collaborative approach across education and healthcare was important for increasing young people's access to consistent and comprehensive RSE (Walker et al., 2023). Although these findings are specific to the perspectives of health professionals based in metropolitan Victoria, they highlight the significant role of outsourced providers in enhancing young people's access to RSE.

Research by Heslop et al. (2020) shed light on the barriers and difficulties outsourced providers may face regarding RSE (Heslop et al., 2020). They qualitatively explored stakeholders' perceptions ($n = 16$) of a youth-focused RSE initiative in rural Western Australia. The study revealed insights from participants representing various sectors, including traditional health promotion (such as youth, education, and health services) and non-traditional settings (such as library services, local media and government, sports, and recreation). Many participants lacked knowledge on how to extend RSE beyond individual-level education to address broader community needs. Those responsible for teaching RSE often felt unprepared, lacking essential skills and professional development. Additionally, communication and collaboration among stakeholders in the rural town were described as notably absent (Heslop et al., 2020). While this study holds specific insights into RSE-focused initiatives within rural settings, the findings highlight some of the unique challenges faced by outsourced providers in delivering RSE.

Despite the use of outsourced RSE programs across various countries, there remains a lack of research exploring the unique, practice-based knowledge of outsourced providers, particularly in the content and delivery of RSE related to sexual violence prevention (see Deloitte et al., 2020; Hayes et al., 2024; Heslop et al., 2020; Sperling, 2022; Waling et al., 2023; Walker et al., 2023). Outsourced providers bring expertise to RSE and are often seen as filling gaps left by school-based delivery. Unlike teachers, providers are not limited by the constraints of the traditional school environment, allowing them greater flexibility to adopt innovative and targeted approaches. Thus, their perspectives are particularly valuable as they are uniquely positioned to identify good practices and barriers to effective RSE implementation, especially in the context of preventing sexual violence. Further research is needed to build the evidence base, given the growing prevalence of outsourced educational programs and the heightened focus on using RSE to prevent sexual violence among young people (Deloitte et al., 2020). Such research is important for informing policy, curricula, and program decisions, ultimately enhancing the delivery and impact of RSE as a key component of a multi-faceted strategy to prevent sexual violence.

1.2. The Current Study

This research explored professional outsourced providers' perspectives on good practice in Australian RSE for young people. Specifically, it examined the core research question, "What do Australian outsourced providers perceive to be the effective features of, and implementation barriers to, school relationships and sexuality education for sexual violence prevention?" To address this question, outsourced providers who engage with RSE were invited to participate in a qualitative interview to discuss their perspectives. Much of the research to date on stakeholder perspectives of RSE is placed within the fields of health promotion and education (e.g., Beres, 2019; Black et al., 2024; Crocker et al., 2019; Goldman, 2011; Heslop et al., 2020; Pound et al., 2017; Walker et al., 2023). This study, however, adopted a criminological lens by considering the structural and social factors that contribute to sexual violence and the mechanisms that can be used within RSE to prevent it.

This perspective informed the analysis by focusing on how outsourced providers perceive RSE as contributing to violence prevention outcomes and by identifying barriers to effective implementation. The remainder of this article proceeds as follows: First, we provide an account of the qualitative methods and data reported in this article. Then, we present and discuss three overarching themes and associated sub-themes that respond to the research question. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings for RSE, with a focus on sexual violence prevention among young people.

2. Methods

In accordance with ethical guidelines, this research received institutional ethics approval from the RMIT University Human Research Ethics Committee (project number 24798). This article reports on the first stage of a larger project that involved in-depth interviews with both outsourced providers who deliver RSE and young people. Further details of the second-stage interviews with young people are available in ([Vrankovich et al., 2024](#)). While the broader project emphasized the critical knowledge and experience of young people themselves in the development of sexual violence prevention, this article specifically considers the insights of outsourced providers for two main reasons. First, as schools often rely on outsourced providers to deliver RSE, exploring their perceptions of good practice is essential to identifying potential gaps or inconsistencies in current practices. Second, their insights can provide a valuable context for developing more effective and inclusive sexual violence prevention programs that better serve young people's needs.

2.1. Participants

Fifteen outsourced providers who engage with RSE in a professional capacity within Australia participated in this research. They were recruited through purposive sampling by using the Google search engine to identify organizations across Australia that delivered RSE programs and were contacted using publicly available information. This sample size was chosen to allow for an in-depth, qualitative exploration of perspectives while remaining manageable within the constraints of the study's scope and resources. The outsourced providers have been identified as "capacity builders" or "external educators" to reflect their primary roles in RSE. External educators were professionals who mainly delivered RSE content to young people within educational settings. Capacity builders primarily worked with parents, teachers, staff members, or other institutional staff to enhance their skills and knowledge in delivering RSE.

The outsourced providers worked for a diverse range of organizations, including government-based initiatives, entities providing outsourced RSE services for school and tertiary education institutions, and organizations dedicated to enhancing the skills of parents, teachers, or staff members in delivering and implementing RSE programs. The organizations delivered RSE lessons in both regional and metropolitan areas in Australia. Organization names are withheld, and pseudonyms have been used to protect the privacy of participants.

2.2. Procedure

Qualitative interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams ($n = 15$) and took place between April 2022 and October 2022. A semi-structured approach was used to engage outsourced providers in open discussions while addressing the research question. The discussions focused on their perceptions of good practice in RSE, the barriers to RSE implementation, and what theory of change underpinned the initiatives they were involved with. All the interviews were audio-recorded using an external recording device. The interviews ranged from 29 to 51 min, with an average duration of 39 min. All interviews

were transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Word by the first author, with the transcripts and audio recordings stored on a secure drive. After the interviews, the outsourced providers were given the opportunity to review their transcript to ensure their voices and pedagogical expertise were accurately captured in the data. They were given a two-week period to review their data. Five chose to review the transcript, with two requesting minor edits, which were actioned. The storage and retention of the data is in accordance with the RMIT University data management policy.

2.3. Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded using an external recording device and transcribed verbatim, and all identifying information was removed before coding began. Using NVivo 12 Pro Software, a reflexive inductive thematic analysis was conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022). Reflexivity is a process of considering the researcher's active role in producing knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The research team acknowledge their perspectives as feminist criminologists, whose contributions to the field are motivated by a progressive aim of promoting non-violence and gender equity. This, in turn, could influence our approaches to data collection, analysis, and interpretation; for example, in our focus on prevention and/or in identifying limitations of conservative approaches to prevention. Reflexivity was further operationalized in the research by the first author maintaining a reflexive journal, reading and re-reading the transcripts, and discussing each stage of the data collection and analysis process with the research team (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022). The data were organized into broad topic codes (e.g., RSE not being a priority, inconsistent/lack of funding) and were then further developed into more cohesive themes (e.g., "The Purse Strings are Very Stretched": Precarious Funding and Limited Time). These themes were data-driven and identified by their salience to the research question. The research team met frequently to explore the themes and engage in discussion, familiarization, reflection, and the interpretation of the data to engage in reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The participants' quotes have been lightly edited to enhance the readability of the findings; however, the meanings remain unchanged.

3. Findings and Discussion

The outsourced providers reflected on their professional experiences and spoke passionately about the delivery of RSE. The findings are organized under broad umbrella themes with key sub-themes. (1) Effective features of RSE: a whole-of-school approach; content on pornography (porn) literacy. (2) Barriers to implementation: conservative gate-keeping; precarious funding and limited time. (3) Various views and approaches to RSE: who should deliver RSE; inconsistent theoretical underpinnings; and whether to take a gendered approach.

3.1. Effective Features of RSE

When discussing the effective features of RSE in preventing sexual violence, outsourced providers highlighted both content and delivery methods. They agreed that a whole-of-school approach should be adopted, and emphasized the inclusion of porn literacy in classroom lessons.

3.1.1. Whole-of-School Approach

The outsourced providers agreed that a whole-of-school approach was essential to enhancing the comprehensiveness of RSE. For example, outsourced providers emphasized, "We know that for sustained change, we need everyone on board" (Emma, external educator) and "I insist on a whole school approach which is best practice, where all the adults are educated and involved in the same conversation" (Lisa, capacity builder). A whole-of-

school approach provides young people with multiple exposures to messages across the curriculum and in different areas of the school and the community (Bragg et al., 2022; Our Watch, 2022; World Health Organization & UNESCO, 2021). It involves engaging students, school staff, teachers, nurses, parents/carers, and the wider community in the process of social and cultural change. Contrasting with curriculum-only strategies, a whole-of-school approach extends beyond the individual level to address various systems of influence and is recognized as best practice in RSE (Bragg et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2018; World Health Organization & UNESCO, 2021). For instance, implementing a whole-of-school approach might involve revisiting school policies and practices to better support student wellbeing. Additionally, to ensure a whole-of-school approach, teacher training and professional development opportunities were considered essential by the outsourced providers.

In support of the evidence base, most of the outsourced providers expressed that teachers often feel underprepared and inadequately trained to teach RSE content to students (see also, Crumper et al., 2023; Burns & Hendriks, 2018; Hayes et al., 2024). Despite recent reforms to the Australian curriculum mandating the inclusion of consent education (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2022), some outsourced providers noted an absence of pre- and in-person training focused on delivering RSE:

We had to fight so much to get consent mentioned in the curriculum and, when it does get released in the next month or so, I think you'll find that word is mentioned a lot. It's a really important starting point, but that doesn't mean it's actually going to happen in schools, because there's no wrap-around support or infrastructure, so teachers still aren't being trained. There's no money being put into professional development. (Lee, capacity builder)

Professional development for teachers to receive and respond to disclosures of sexual violence was also considered to be particularly important. For example, Ella (capacity builder) highlighted, "Something that I've seen a lot in the [tertiary education] space is people finding out for themselves after they've attended a session or read a resource. They'll say, oh, actually, I have been sexually assaulted three years ago, but I didn't realize". Similarly, Sally (external educator) detailed the following:

We look at training up a dozen first responders within schools because what we know is often in schools, people might have had a bad experience, and they speak to a teacher they have rapport with. Well, of course, that teacher might not have actually had adequate training in responding to disclosures or what to do when they hear one.

Research shows that pre-service training can enhance teachers' attitudes, knowledge, and skills for delivering RSE confidently (Hendriks et al., 2024). Thus, teacher training should also focus on building educators' confidence to respond to sexual violence disclosures in trauma-informed ways, in order to create safer school environments.

3.1.2. Content on Pornography Literacy

Most of the outsourced providers spoke on the negative influence that porn can have on young people's knowledge surrounding sexuality. Tyler (external educator) provided an example, speaking about how they were asked "a lot of weird questions about animals" at one school after a pornographic video was circulated that showed themes of bestiality. Amy (external educator) also illustrated the following:

Porn is really impacting young people's views on certain things. It's actually quite concerning. We're starting to talk about things like choking and strangulation being the expected thing from a young woman's point of view in a heterosexual

relationship because that's what young people see in porn. . . You often don't see consent being displayed in a lot of porn that young people are consuming.

Amy's concern aligns with recent research suggesting that strangulation during sex is becoming increasingly common among young people, often without their awareness of proper practices or associated risks ([Herbenick et al., 2022](#); [Sharman et al., 2024](#)). For instance, research by [Woodley and Jaunzems \(2024\)](#) examined how teenagers view the portrayal of sexual choking in pornography, highlighting concerns about the normalization of risky sexual behaviors and the need for comprehensive RSE to address these issues.

Many of the outsourced providers recognized that young people are exposed to porn from a young age, which can negatively influence their perceptions of sexual practices. However, instead of advocating for young people to avoid porn entirely, they emphasized the importance of incorporating porn literacy into RSE. For example, Bindi (capacity builder) detailed that porn is "often the scapegoat" for harmful behaviors and people can "just jump on the hating porn bandwagon". They argued:

People will be like, this behavior is happening because of porn, you can stop all the behaviors by stopping porn, but how about we just start having conversations about it? People put the problem on [porn] when a lot of the problems are the adults in the individuals' life who can't communicate about what sex could look like, which is pleasurable and fun.

As Bindi suggests, the reliance on porn as an educational tool should motivate efforts to enhance young people's access to RSE, rather than restricting their access to porn entirely (see also [Crabbe & Flood, 2021](#); [Goldstein, 2019](#); [Setty, 2023](#)). Porn literacy in RSE should empower young people to critically navigate the influence of porn, helping them to reduce its potentially adverse impact on sexual experiences ([Crabbe & Flood, 2021](#); [Woodley & Jaunzems, 2024](#)).

3.2. Barriers to Implementation

There was agreement among outsourced providers regarding key barriers to the implementation of RSE. Their responses largely focused on conservative influences, precarious funding and limited time, here discussed in turn.

3.2.1. Conservative Gatekeeping

The outsourced providers raised that RSE should begin early in young people's developmental years, but that they consistently faced conservative influences that gate-kept what they could include in educational materials. The influence of governments on young people's access to RSE was discussed by a few outsourced providers. For example, Amy (external educator) highlighted the tensions between aiming to deliver appropriate and relevant content to young people, and sexuality being considered a taboo-laden subject;

Sex and consent are considered sensitive topics for lots of governments. So, when people are funded to do this work, there is a bit of tension. . . It can sometimes be challenging to balance the needs of what young people are wanting in the content and what stakeholders are comfortable to include. . . It says something that government organizations don't want to talk about this stuff, like what are the best sex positions. But that's the kind of resource that would be great for young people.

Conservative schools were also heavily discussed among the outsourced providers as contexts that restricted young people's access to good-quality RSE. Specifically, the exclusion of pleasure and intimacy in conversations about sex was identified as an area of key concern. Emma (external educator) illustrated this, stating, "As far as what schools

actually want, it's really just prevention and damage control. I think that is a massive gap as teaching about pleasure will make it easier for young people to have conversations around consent". Like Emma, other external educators shared their experiences of conservative schools restricting the content taught to young people. For instance:

There are some limitations around being inclusive in terms of sexualities, it's always, sex only happens in a marriage, it can't happen before marriage and it's only ever between a man and a woman. So, not allowing for exploration of different sexualities. . . Even using a word like clitoris, it's an anatomical body part but it's so taboo in certain circles, particularly in conservative schools. So, using words like clitoris, testicle or masturbation can catch people off guard. (Jess, external educator)

Similarly, other outsourced providers noted, "We've had schools who want to pull the curriculum apart and are like, don't do masturbation or anything about touching themselves" (Bertie, external educator and capacity builder) and "Sometimes we're in religious schools, and they don't even want us to acknowledge that young people are having sex before marriage" (Hilary, external educator).

The use of imagery to support educators in delivering RSE to young people was identified as a challenge for some of the outsourced providers. For example, Bindi (capacity builder) provided an example of a website their team developed that featured anatomically correct images for people across various age groups, reflecting:

It's very hard to find appropriate educational images around sex and relationships and a lot of teachers are trying to find pictures to support their teaching. But they're on the education login and lots of sites are blocked. So, having these images makes it a lot easier for people to educate in an appropriate workplace-relevant way.

In another example, Lee (capacity builder) described using an educational film to prompt discussions about relationships, acknowledging, "It's difficult because they're under 18. So, you're trying to bring up these things but not be too graphic about it". The reluctance to engage with explicit yet educational materials could stem from institutional concerns about offending community values or overstepping perceived moral boundaries, reflecting forms of conservative gatekeeping. This gatekeeping may limit educators' ability to deliver accurate and age-appropriate resources and can perpetuate tensions between protecting young people and addressing their developmental needs.

The tension between censorship and access to appropriate educational materials highlights challenges faced by educators in navigating both ethical and legal boundaries in the delivery of RSE. This raises deeper concerns about the balance between protecting young people from exposure to explicit content and the need to provide them with realistic, relevant resources for understanding sexuality and relationships in an educational context. The challenge of balancing the needs of young people with the viewpoints of those in positions of authority also translated to education settings beyond schools:

One of the biggest gaps is being able to get in a room in the first place and past the institutional barriers. [Tertiary education institutions] can be afraid to engage external providers or young people because they don't see sexual violence as a part of [tertiary education] life, and they say people have learnt this in school. But sexual violence is rampant at [tertiary education institutions]. (Ella, capacity builder)

Here, Ella highlights the institutional failures to recognize sexual violence as a systemic and prevalent issue, which leads to an inability to engage with young people from the outset. Certainly, the challenge of "getting into the school" (Tyler, external educator) was an

initial barrier that some outsourced providers typically faced in implementing RSE. Thus, conservative gatekeeping can operate not only through restrictions on content, but also through institutional reluctance to acknowledge the importance of comprehensive RSE as a strategy to address issues such as sexual violence.

3.2.2. “The Purse Strings Are Very Stretched”: Precarious Funding and Limited Time

Most outsourced providers contended that school-based RSE is often not a priority. For example, they detailed that “schools are under pressure to cover off the curriculum and some very much just tick the box” (Tyler, external educator) and “across the jurisdictions in Australia, there are uneven levels of commitment [to RSE]” (Jacob, external educator). Furthermore, the limited time schools dedicate to RSE often resulted in the outsourced providers’ lessons being delivered less effectively. For example,

Us delivering 13 lessons to 24 kids versus teaching one auditorium-style class to 250 kids is very different. There’s four days’ worth of work or two hours’ worth of work. Schools often have to look at it on a monetary level. . . They have to work within the constraints of what the system is. (Hilary, external educator)

Indeed, a lack of funding was the most significant barrier outsourced providers encountered to implementing RSE. As Bertie (external educator and capacity builder) stated, “The limit to sexual education is with the funding of the organization or school who doesn’t have the funding to be able to have that type of education. . . The purse strings are very stretched, but we have so much more to do”. Like others, Bertie went on to detail the lack of consistency and continuity of funding, describing how RSE initiatives typically receive short-term grants:

[RSE outsourced providers] get \$10,000 to do a little bit and someone somewhere else can get \$10,000 and do a little bit. . . There’s not a consistent flow of funding because even if you are lucky enough to secure some funding, it’s usually only for 12 months. . . We need a whole-nation approach.

Similarly, Lee (capacity builder) argued that a more “sustainable funding model” was imperative to ensuring that financial support “come[s] from more sources”:

There are only a few branches of the government funding for sexual education and they’re all doing it in an ad hoc way without speaking to each other. . . They take a bunch of people who are all very passionate about these topics and all have great expertise, but they make us compete against each other for the same pot of money. We are also on recurring two-and-three-year contracts, so it’s very hard to get any forward momentum because we are continually trying to justify our contract to keep hold of our money and are getting organized to get the next piece of money.

Bindi (capacity builder) further highlighted how efforts to “be more sex-positive and amplify people’s sexual experiences can often be seen as not necessary” and thus, it is often “easier to get funding for protective behaviors or gender-based violence”.

The fragmented and inconsistent funding model could hamper the effectiveness of RSE, limiting both the scope and sustainability of programs (Fine & McClelland, 2023; Quinlivan, 2018). The reliance on short-term grants and competitive funding structures undermines the development of comprehensive, long-term RSE initiatives that effectively address sexual violence among young people. A sustained and coordinated funding model is needed to implement evidence-based, comprehensive RSE programs. Without this, RSE could remain constrained in its effectiveness to prevent sexual violence, perpetuating gaps in young people’s knowledge and skills related to sexuality.

3.3. Various Views and Approaches to RSE

The interviews also revealed several areas of disagreement among the outsourced providers when it came to the delivery and content of RSE. Questions were raised regarding who is best placed to deliver RSE; which theoretical frameworks underpinned outsourced RSE initiatives; and whether content should take a gendered or gender-neutral approach.

3.3.1. Who Should Deliver RSE?

All the outsourced providers concurred that a professional with subject matter expertise should deliver RSE to young people. However, there was disagreement regarding the most effective delivery agents for this content. The capacity-builders emphasized the importance of equipping classroom teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to educate young people about relationships and sexuality. Lisa articulated this viewpoint, stating, “It is not the best, most effective way to teach this topic from an external educator walking into a classroom and delivering an hour or two of content and walking out again”. On the other hand, external educators strongly advocated for the benefits of their approach to delivering RSE. For example:

We are subject matter experts and content experts, and we’re also actually education experts. . . Very few people feel comfortable to stand in front of a room of 50 people and talk about masturbation. We’ve got a nuanced understanding of the pedagogy and how to really create safe and supportive learning environments. So, we can use our expertise from our teaching in conjunction with our expertise in the subject matter and content. (Hilary)

Emma (external educator) also highlighted the advantage of being an outsider to the school environment, stating, “I’m biased, but if it’s delivered by their teachers, that can be really off putting because that’s someone [students] have to see every day or majority of the year. They might not feel comfortable to talk to them about [sex]”. While the value of privacy and anonymity was discussed, Bindi (capacity builder) shared a potential limitation to outsourced RSE when engaging with some students living with disability. Bindi detailed that one focus of their work involved education about the boundaries between private and public spaces. They noted, “People talk [to young people] about not talking to strangers about private matters, but then we have an external facilitator coming in to teach consent for a one-off session, but we’ve told people not to talk to strangers about this stuff”. Here, Bindi highlights how there are potential contradictions in external facilitators being invited into private discussions about sensitive topics.

While the outsourced providers advocated for and worked within one form of delivery, they often still acknowledged the importance and place of the other in RSE. For example:

I think teachers are best placed, so sometimes I tread on the toes of some external providers whose job it is to go into schools and be the guest speaker. But I do promote them and think they have a really important role. I know when I go in as an external guest speaker, I can say things that are a little naughtier than probably the average classroom teacher. . . However, I don’t want us to think that’s what primary prevention is, that you can outsource it. It needs to be more comprehensive than that. If you do have a guest speaker, there needs to be follow-up. (Lee, capacity builder)

The “best educator” debate (see also [Allen, 2009](#)) raises important questions about who is best suited to deliver RSE. While a cohesive strategy could involve both external educators and capacity builders, tensions exist with each approach. Empowering teachers through capacity-building requires sustained support and training, which in turn depends on institutional commitment and resources. On the other hand, relying on external edu-

cators for subject-specific expertise risks turning RSE into a series of disjointed, one-off lessons, rather than fostering a comprehensive and sustained approach. If either method is underfunded or poorly executed, students may receive inconsistent or inadequate RSE, undermining its effectiveness in preventing sexual violence. This highlights the potential for a “hybrid model”, where both external educators and teachers—supported by capacity builders—play essential roles in ensuring young people have meaningful access to RSE (see also [Deloitte et al., 2020](#)). A hybrid model can also work to instill a whole-of-school approach to RSE by promoting collaboration, building teacher confidence, and embedding consistent education throughout the school culture and curriculum.

3.3.2. Inconsistent Theoretical Underpinnings

During the interviews, outsourced providers were asked about the framework or theories of change underpinning the initiatives they were involved with. Theoretical frameworks are crucial for understanding the complexities underlying sexual violence and directly inform prevention strategies ([Allen, 2009](#); [Berns, 2001](#)). They guide the development of initiatives, highlight key intervention areas, and shape the nature of prevention efforts ([Carmody, 2009](#)). Without a consistent theory of change, it becomes difficult to identify the “active ingredients” necessary for effective RSE ([Paulauskaite et al., 2022](#), p. 611).

Firstly, participants identified a range of theories, frameworks, or models that guided their work. These included a public health approach, a social model of disability, a human rights perspective, a trauma-informed approach, a sex-positive approach, a health promotion framework, an intersectional approach, a capacity-building framework, UNESCO’s International Technical Guidance on Sexual Education, a whole-of-school approach, and the social ecological model. While these theories and frameworks share some foundational principles in relation to sexual violence prevention, the diversity of responses raises questions about the effectiveness and consistency of theoretical underpinnings in RSE.

Participants’ responses to this question varied significantly, with few readily able to outline a specific theory or framework. However, Bindi (capacity builder) provided a clear answer, stating,

We work by the social model of disability, which is probably the first thing to come to mind. It’s essentially that, the reason that people with disabilities are excluded or find it hard to participate in life, community or work is not inherently because they have a disability. It’s because of how our cities, our schools, our education system, sexual health systems are designed, and all the stereotypes that come along with that.

Others struggled to answer this question on the spot, with responses like: “It’s been a long time since I’ve visited this” (Lisa, capacity builder) or “Not as an organization. I wasn’t around at the time of writing the content, so there very well could be [a framework or theory]” (Tyler, external provider).

When asked about theories or frameworks, some stakeholders noted that their work was not underpinned by a formal theory, but rather by broader principles of practice. For example, “in terms of theory of change, not necessarily, or not at this current point in time. . .our core value is all around intersectionality” (Ella, capacity builder), “I don’t know if it’s a framework so much, but we use an intersectional feminist approach” (Emma, external provider) and “I wouldn’t say we have a framework that’s specific. . .I think we probably use a few different ones” (Amy, external provider). The reliance on broader principles rather than specific theoretical frameworks could reflect a flexible, practice-informed approach to RSE among outsourced providers. While this adaptability could allow for providers to address diverse needs and contexts, it also underlines potential

challenges in achieving consistency and rigor in the design and delivery of RSE initiatives working to prevent sexual violence.

This finding—while not diminishing the valuable work of the outsourced providers—highlights potential gaps in national leadership, policies, and systems that could facilitate a more consistent and uniform theoretical model. It illustrates the need for a robust theoretical foundation to ensure prevention efforts are grounded in a comprehensive understanding of sexual violence. Establishing a standardized national framework for RSE could be a pivotal initial step in addressing the multifaceted needs of young people and the prevention of sexual violence (Carmody, 2009).

Additionally, a potential issue arising from the use of outsourced organizations for RSE delivery is the potential for inconsistency and variability in educational content and approaches. Unlike standardized curricula, outsourced organizations typically develop their own resources, materials, and teaching methods. While Australian guidelines exist (e.g., Department of Social Services, 2023), there are no national standards (other than the curriculum) or evaluation processes that outsourced providers must adhere to before teaching their content. This variation can result in disparities in students' learning experiences across Australia. This was highlighted by a recent national stocktake report on RSE programs, which identified significant differences among 68 resources in terms of target audience, quality, approach, focus, and evidence base (Pfitzner et al., 2022). The report argued that while there has been an increased uptake of RSE, many school-based initiatives have not been rigorously evaluated, or the evaluations are not publicly accessible. While some Australian states and territories offer guidance for schools engaging with outsourced providers, schools are responsible for selecting a suitable organization and ensuring they meet the needs of the students, staff, parents, and the broader school community. This responsibility may place additional burdens on schools, requiring them to allocate time and resources to vet external organizations.

3.3.3. Whether to Take a Gendered Approach

The outsourced providers frequently spoke about the importance of de-gendering their educational content, often describing their materials as “gender-neutral”. In its simplest form, a gender-neutral approach implies that the content does not cater to a specific gender. Several external educators described intentional efforts to use gender-neutral pronouns during role-playing or case study examples to ensure inclusivity and encourage participation. For example, Jess (external educator) stated that they use gender-neutral pronouns to “leave it up to the participants’ imagination” and ensure that “everyone is welcome to be a part of the conversation”. Tyler (external educator) also detailed, “We just keep it very gender-neutral, culturally neutral. If I’m talking about how consent needs to be ongoing, I don’t use any pronouns”. In summary, using gender-neutral content was perceived to form the foundations of an inclusive approach to RSE.

When considering RSE as a strategy to prevent sexual violence—a phenomenon that, while affecting all people, is deeply rooted in social and cultural ideas and notions about gender—then the focus on de-gendering content can present complexities. To illustrate this, the classroom-based experiences of external educators teaching about consent can offer insights. A few external educators noted the distinct difference in how boys and girls engage specifically with consent education. For example, Emma shared:

Something that is always reoccurring and whenever we hire new educators, we’ve been into some single-sex boys’ schools recently and we’ll be talking about consent. And then they will try and give you every single different context or situation and ask, but what if? But what if? Just to try and see how far they can push things.

In contrast, Emma emphasized how they were “so surprised and consistently blown away by the intelligence and strength of the young, female single-sex schools”. Leeloo (external educator) echoed this sentiment, describing how questions from boys in private schools often reflected a problematic mindset:

Unfortunately, it pains me to say it but the questions coming out of the private boys’ schools, the subtext is very much how do we have sex without getting into trouble? They’re not thinking about their sexual partners as people. The questions coming out of the private girls’ schools are very much along the lines of, how do I say no without making someone angry? How do I keep my friends safe? It’s really disappointing to see that disparity.

This disparity illustrates how gendered and heterosexual social norms may continue to shape attitudes and behaviors related to sex and consent. As Lisa (capacity builder) noted, de-gendering content can sideline critical discussions about power, privilege, and patriarchal structures that influence sexual violence;

All of the content is inclusive and non-gendered as much as possible when we talk about human sexuality. Except when we are talking about disrespect, rigid gender-based stereotypes and patterns of behavior that are based on men’s violence against women, then we actually acknowledge that is a gendered issue. The current data is gendered. . . We do acknowledge that we speak about it in a heteronormative and cisgender way because that’s what the data is telling us.

It may seem logical to enhance inclusivity by taking a gender-neutral approach to RSE content. However, in line with feminist and queer theories, neutrality in RSE may do little to promote inclusivity or prevent sexual violence. Feminist theories highlight the importance of addressing patriarchal structures and gendered power imbalances that contribute to and perpetuate sexual violence (e.g., [Brownmiller, 1975](#); [Kelly, 1988](#); [Rennison, 2014](#)). Queer theorists challenge the notion that gender-neutrality will be inclusive by emphasizing how systemic power structures and heteronormative expectations are embedded in social interactions, and thus, in sexual violence (e.g., [Ison, 2019](#); [McCann & Monaghan, 2019](#); [Mortimer et al., 2019](#)). For instance, the disparity between boys’ and girls’ engagement with consent education—where boys test boundaries and girls seek safety—highlights how these norms might continue to burden girls with emotional labor and risk management in relationships. A gender-neutral approach could ultimately ignore and potentially reinforce these inequalities, rather than working to dismantle them.

Some of the outsourced providers also spoke on the limitations to a consent-centered approach to RSE. A growing body of research has argued that, while it should be included in RSE, focusing exclusively on consent can reduce sexual interactions to a binary framework of “yes” and “no”, neglecting the broader socio-cultural factors that shape young people’s sexual experiences (e.g., [Beres, 2019](#); [Vrankovich et al., 2024](#); [Woodley et al., 2024](#)). As Leeloo observed, boys questioning “how to have sex without getting into trouble” indeed reflects this reductionist view, wherein consent is framed as a mechanism to avoid consequences rather than part of a broader ethic of care, respect, and empathy. Ella (capacity builder) asserted the need to situate consent within a broader framework;

Over the past couple of years, since there’s been quite some movement in the space, people are particularly focusing on primary prevention and sexual consent. But we need to incorporate the bigger picture of sexual wellbeing and attitudes towards gender roles and sexual rights and ethics.

Centering relationships, sexuality, and consent education without integrating discussions on gender norms, power dynamics, and socio-cultural structures—such as heteronormativity and the patriarchy—risks offering an incomplete understanding of the root

causes of sexual violence. Ultimately, effective RSE must engage critically with the broader systems—such as patriarchal norms, heteronormativity and gendered power imbalances—that sustain sexual violence. Without embedding this critical lens, RSE risks reinforcing rather than dismantling the societal and cultural norms it seeks to change (Beres, 2019; Burton et al., 2023; Hindes, 2022; Marson, 2021, 2022; van Leent et al., 2023).

4. Implications

This study has provided unique insights into Australian outsourced provider perspectives on RSE, with a focus on sexual violence prevention among young people. Overall, the outsourced providers largely agreed that to be effective in preventing sexual violence, RSE needs to involve content on porn literacy to help young people critically navigate sexual content online. There was also consensus that RSE should entail a whole-of-school approach, whereby parents, teachers, outsourced providers, and the community deliver consistent messages to young people about sexuality and respectful relationships. Pre-service training and professional development for teachers were thought to be crucial for facilitating teachers' delivery of RSE, particularly for responding to student disclosures of sexual violence following RSE. The outsourced providers also identified key barriers to the implementation of RSE. These involved conservative government policies and school environments that restricted educational content about sex, as well as limited funding and time dedicated to RSE in the curriculum.

There were also several points of difference among the outsourced providers when it came to the content and delivery of RSE. They had different recommendations regarding who should deliver RSE, emphasizing the unique strengths and drawbacks of delivery by external educators, teachers, and capacity-builders, respectively. A hybrid model involving all parties may be the best way to reconcile the different perspectives and capitalize on the strengths of each educator (Quinlivan, 2018; Waling et al., 2023). Such a model also reaffirms the whole-of-school approach, which all outsourced providers valued. The interviews also highlighted many inconsistencies when it came to the theoretical frameworks underpinning RSE initiatives in which outsourced providers were involved. Different theoretical underpinnings can result in very different approaches to RSE content. In the current study, for example, some outsourced providers took a gender-neutral approach to the development of their materials, while others felt it was important to acknowledge the gendered power dynamics that shape sexual experiences. While we are not advocating for a one-size-fits-all approach, there is clearly room for more national leadership and consistent theories of change to guide RSE, particularly if we want outsourced providers to consistently address key attitudes, systems, and power dynamics that are associated with sexual violence (Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2012; Waling et al., 2023).

Our findings have implications for both school and tertiary education contexts. Educators, policymakers, and governments can leverage these insights to guide future improvements in RSE. These include refining teacher training, ensuring consistent theoretical frameworks and comprehensive program delivery among outsourced providers, and addressing key social and systemic challenges, such as conservative influences, and funding limitations that hinder the effectiveness of RSE programs. Such movements could help to bolster both teacher and outsourced provider confidence in their delivery of RSE (Allen, 2020; Hendriks et al., 2024; Quinlivan, 2018). Additionally, the research highlights the need for a comprehensive, whole-of-school approach to RSE, and suggests the importance of incorporating emerging topics, such as porn literacy, into the curriculum. While our study is focused on the Australian context, outsourced providers are also frequently used in other countries (e.g., England—Crumper et al., 2023; United States of America—Sperling, 2022; Canada—Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights, 2020; Zambia—Mbizvo et al., 2023);

therefore, the findings may help to inform RSE practices across the globe. By addressing the inconsistencies and barriers to implementation, young people could derive improved access to high-quality RSE. This will provide them with the necessary knowledge and skills to navigate sexuality and relationships, ultimately playing a crucial role in preventing sexual violence.

5. Future Research

The current qualitative study interviewed Australian outsourced providers and asked them to recount the theories of change that underpin the RSE initiatives they are involved with. While this provided initial insights into the varying theoretical frameworks followed, future research should engage in a deeper exploration of the theoretical foundations, perhaps through independent observation studies, by shadowing outsourced providers or mapping and reviewing key materials. Furthermore, future research could collect demographic data from the outsourced providers, such as their gender identity and number of years working in the field, which could provide further nuances to the data. Our research also highlighted that outsourced providers are keen to provide young people with content on pleasure and sexuality, supported by educational imagery (e.g., anatomically correct images of genitals). This is something young people themselves have also called for (e.g., [Astle et al., 2021](#); [Kantor & Lindberg, 2020](#); [Riggs et al., 2022](#); [Vrankovich et al., 2024](#)). Future research could explore the legal challenges and parameters educators may face in providing RSE that educates young people about the mechanics of sexual activity using imagery.

6. Conclusions

Schools often rely on outsourced providers to deliver RSE to young people. This study has helped to build the evidence base on outsourced providers' practices and perceptions of RSE, particularly as it relates to sexual violence prevention. It shed light on key areas of agreement regarding the effective features of and implementation barriers to RSE, as well as inconsistencies in views and approaches among outsourced providers that need to be addressed in policy and practice moving forward. RSE has been identified as a key strategy to prevent sexual violence among young people. We hope that our findings will help to maximize the potential of RSE in promoting positive sexual experiences for young people.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, S.V., G.H. and A.P.; methodology, S.V., G.H. and A.P.; software, S.V.; formal analysis, S.V.; writing—original draft preparation, S.V., G.H. and A.P.; writing—review and editing, S.V., G.H. and A.P.; supervision, G.H. and A.P. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: The first author was supported by the Australian Government through the provision of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of RMIT University (protocol code 24798 and 17 March 2022).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The dataset presented in this article is not readily available in order to protect the confidentiality and privacy of participants. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to gemma.hamilton@rmit.edu.au.

Acknowledgments: We would like to acknowledge the 15 incredible outsourced providers who took part in this research. Thank you for sharing your expertise, perspectives, and experiences with us.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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