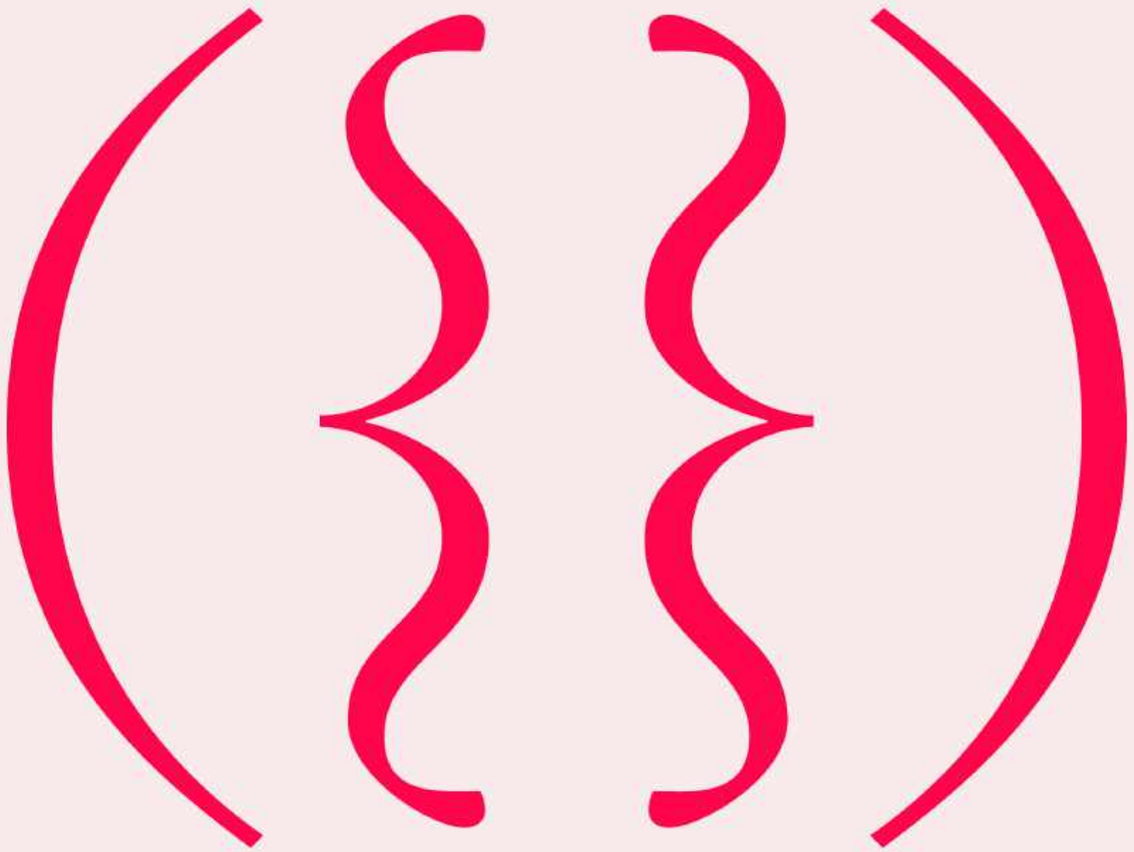

sex education

an insight report by Daniel Paterson

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Introduction
to explore the topic of sex education

The topic of sex education has always fascinated me since I was taught it in year six at primary school. Learning the ins and out of the human body and finding out the intricacy of sexual reproduction and all the rewards and problems that may occur when doing it. Besides my obsession with the subject, I've spoken to friends and peers about the subject and found they have similar viewpoints to me around the topic.

Each person I spoke to had different opinions around the topic from saying that it should be taught to children at an earlier age, and with some saying it should only be taught to people that are of age to have sexual intercourse. As for mentioned, I have an allure towards the subject. Being taught this from an early age it sparked an interest in biology and my vast interest in science.

However, when it came to the time to gain more knowledge into the subject at secondary school in a lesson called PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economics), it was taught in a way that it seemed the teachers were hiding some secrets to the pupils as if they thought we were too young to learn the complexity or aftermath that comes with having sexual intercourse. Yes, we are all aware of some of the aftermath that can come with sexual intercourse but, do people know enough on how to solve said problem.

At KS3 pupils are only taught a few minor topics within the sex education syllabus in PSHE, for example, ***"to recognise the emotional changes that take place at puberty"*** (Allertson and Davies, 2001) and also taught about sexual reproduction and the awareness of sexually transmitted infections and diseases, which are only a few of the topics that are taught to children aged 11 to 14. Nonetheless, KS4 (children aged 14 to 16) are taught, in my opinion, only one important topic at this age and that is

"in context of the importance of relationships, how different forms of contraceptive work, and where to get advice, in order to inform future choices" (Allertson and Davies, 2001).

All other topics taught in these two key stages are based around the topics of relationships, divorce, and mental health which are all important topics in themselves but sex education is almost tossed aside almost as if it is not important.

With myself now me being of a certain age, the topic of sexual intercourse is thrown around as if it's nobody's business, people are more open to talking about the topic. Even now there are some topics and questions that I need to be answered which I was not taught in my younger years. This in turn, has allowed me to pinpoint this topic as my point of interest for this project, and to see what I can find in helping me look for a problem to solve within this chosen area.

Aims

My aim for this research project is to look into how sex education is taught at different key stages in education, what are the views of the younger generation compared to the older generation regarding the topic, and also look into the religious beliefs surrounding the topic to see if there is an underlining factor in stopping people wanting to learn about the subject. By looking into these different topics I should be able to have enough research to back up my future project, and give me an insight into the subject so I will be able to see if there is any way I could improve the teaching of this subject or find a way to hack into the subject to try and improve for people who need it.

Obejctives

My objectives for this research project are as followed; research into the topics of education, religion, and the different generations to see if there are any themes occurring in these groups, conduct interviews with people in the groups as for mentioned to see also if there are any running themes in which sex education is taught, and conduct a focus group with children in education at different key stages to see what their opinions are on what they are taught. This research should allow me to get a deeper insight into the topic and give me a fully formed research question so I can start the second part of my project.

Methodology

Books, Journals and Articles

After solidifying my chosen topic for this insights report, I started to conduct my research by looking in local libraries and online journal into the topic of sex education. I first started by looking into the topic of education and how different key stages are taught differently within England and Wales. Looking at books and journals, such as PSE in Focus Sex Education by Allertson and Davies and Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education by the Department of Education. Looking into these books and journals has given me a deeper insight into what should be taught at different key stages in both English and Welsh schools, and also what is required for them to teach. For example,

"In teaching Relationships Education and RSE, schools should ensure that the needs of all pupils are appropriately met, and that all pupils understand the importance of equality and respect."
(Assets.publishing.service.gov.uk, 2019).

Having a vast range of journal, books, articles and videos online allows me to research my topic conveniently at any time. This in turn allowing me to research quickly and efficiently when necessary in case the research I have found is not justifiable for what I have already found or doing.

interviews

I have also conducted interviews with people from different backgrounds and age groups so I can gather a range of insights from a variety of viewpoints. People I have interviewed include;

- A 20-year-old Christian who is at a university
- A 70 and 68-year-old couple who live in England
- A teacher at a primary school
- A teacher at a secondary school
- A lecturer at a college
- 10 students across different universities

With interviews being a rich source of qualitative research Each interview I conducted I wanted to take a pragmatic approach towards them. Taking each interviewee into consideration. Thinking about where to conduct the interview, when should it take place, my tone of voice and how I come across. I also wanted my interview to be semi-structured. This, in turn, meaning that I can adapt my questions depending on who I am interviewing, for example, I may use some colloquialisms when speaking to a younger audience and more of a formal language when speaking to an older audience, such as, teachers and lecturers.

The questions asked will have no room for yes and no answers, except only when the question asked has a follow-up question which can allow them to explain in more detail. I asked each interviewee around 6 to 10 questions depending on if they have given me information on a topic I did not originally think of or if I wanted to delve deeper in to question I have already asked.

When interviewing I either travelled to the people I was interviewing or met them at a place that was convenient to them, such as their own university or a public place so they didn't feel uncomfortable when speaking one on one. Ultimately this will allow them to speak freely when answering my questions. I used two different types of interviews when doing my research, face-to-face and phone interviews. I would've preferred not to do a phone interview, however, the person I was interviewing was unavailable and it was the only time that I could speak to them.

Focus Groups

To solidify my findings from online research and interviews I went on to conduct a few focus groups at my local schools. The reason why I conducted these focus groups is to try and compartmentalize my research. Focus groups have been proven to be a viable source to get a variety of answers, such as; to investigate complex behavior, to provide a broader range of information and to add a human dimension to impersonal data. The focus groups I formed were created of 4 different key stages; key stage 2, key stage 3, key stage 4 and 5. Even though the key stages are close together, the age range in them (ages 11-18) gives me a wide range of different views and opinions.

I went to a primary school, secondary school and a college to try and get the widest range of data that I could get, and also at the same time conducting my interviews with the teachers at these places to save my own time. I tried to fit in my focus groups with the schools' timetables. Placing myself within their timetable means I am not interfering with the schools' planned lessons in PSHE and also getting the class environment that I wanted allowing me to easily control the class without them distracting me and going off on a tangent.

I used similar style questions to what I used in my interviews so I could see if there was a running theme with the answers I was receiving, similar with changing the way I speak and act to keep the answers I received in the same phrasing and language depending on which age group I am speaking to.

The research methods I have used allows me to have a wider range of results than just sticking to one type of method. Each method chosen has given me a deeper insight into other people's own personal opinions and views on the topic that I thought did not have in the first place when starting this insights report. Having my own views gave me a basis of what other people might think, but doing this creates a bigger picture and creates a whole different picture on what I could proceed to do in the future of this project.

Discussion

Online Research

From all the research I have conducted previously, the findings I have found have given me a deeper insight into my chosen topic. From doing my online research looking at journals, articles and books have allowed me to get information that I wouldn't necessarily receive from doing interviews with teachers at educational institutes. Each piece of research found gives me different sub-topics that I could possibly use as a basis to continue with in the next part of this project. For example, the quote mention earlier

"In teaching Relationships Education and RSE... equality and respect" (Assets.publishing.service.gov.uk, 2019)

From the publication created by the Department of Education the basis of this quote is written around the topic of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender or otherwise known as LGBT. To think that only a matter of a decade ago this kind of topic wouldn't be openly taught in schools and was most likely only taught to people who asked about it. This in turn, showing that the topic of different genders and sexuality is becoming more prominent in the curriculum for PSHE.

I then carried on looking into the topics of religion and how sex education is taught or preached. One book I found, Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum By Warren A. Nord, Charles C. Haynes comments on sex education only five times, one of which says "sex education focuses on the unhappy consequences of unplanned pregnancies and STD's" (Nord and Haynes, 1998).

Even though this publication is from 1998 it still shows how reclusive some religions are towards the aspect of teaching people the topic of sex education. On the other hand, from the same book, Nord and Haynes say "not telling the person with whom proposes to have sex that he or she has an STD is morally wrong" (Nord and Haynes, 1998). This still shows that the topic of religion still teaches people proper morals and the awareness of sexually transmitted diseases and infections.

In the subject of education from the perspective of the older generations, the book *Sexuality Education: Past, Present, and Future by Elizabeth Schroeder and Judy Kuriansky* the chapter called "Family Life and Sex Education in the Turbulent Sixties" Schroeder and Kuriansky explain some of the obstacles that face school programs, one being

"lack of professionalization, related to inadequate teacher preparation opportunities and lack of any established standards".

This shows that back in the sixties when most children and adult's parents were in school that the teachers did not have the right resources or knowledge to teach the subject, or most likely have little experience to teach children the subject due to them being either immature or inexperienced within the field. With this quote, it brings to my attention that with our own parents not being taught the knowledge of sex education, how could they be prepared to teach their own children or students in the future.

This creates a snowball effect of where teachers aren't prepared to teach students, which then when the students grow up, they do not have the right amount of knowledge to teach other people making everyone less aware of problems or issues that may occur in their future lives.

Within the topic of sex education, I have found that the topic of HIV and AIDS is quite a shied away topic. Not only is it well known, but the treatment for it isn't as well known and often "optimistic" (The health of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, 2011) in where the treatment provided seems like a miracle that's never going to happen. This book also states

"greater numbers of male sexual partners, unprotected intercourse with HIV-positive partners, amphetamine or heavy alcohol or drug use before sex" (The health of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. (2011). Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press.)

which are all related to the transmission between gay and bisexual men.

All of these points create arguments and boosts the stigma of gay and bisexual men being the biggest transmitter of HIV and AIDS, which creates a big issue for the LGBT community with people still be unwanted within society and disrespectful towards people's choices and actions towards the community.

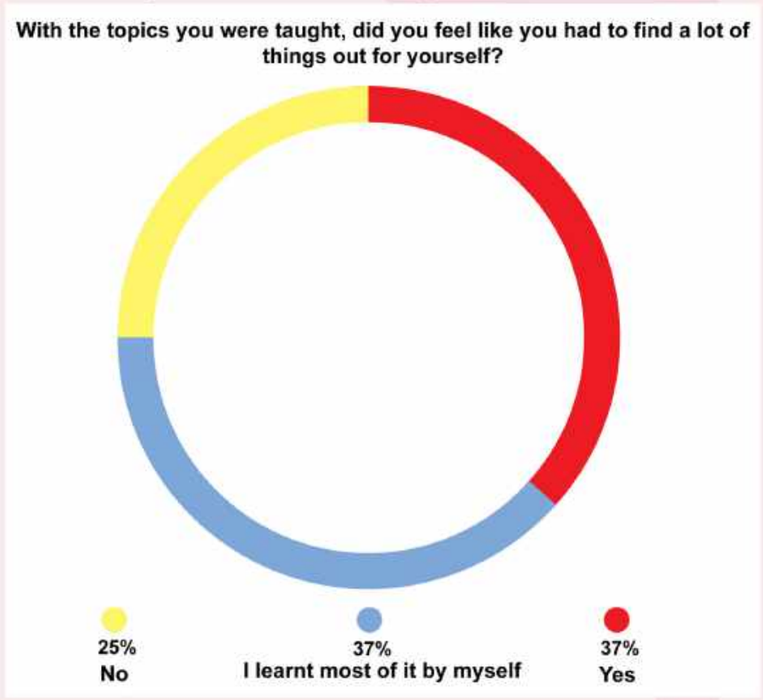
One book I found called Sex: A Book for Teens: an Uncensored Guide to Your Body, Sex, and Safety by Nikol Hasler contains most information taught to children in education with topics including; masturbation, oral, anal and vaginal sex, and also birth control. This book goes quite in-depth into the topics whilst using colloquialisms and slang to appeal to a younger audience. Books this style could help children get the answers they want without getting embarrassed when asking the questions in class, parents or siblings. For instance,

"a boner, erection, hard on, or stiffy usually starts with the brain" (Hasler, 2012)

is a perfect example of using the correct jargon to fit the appropriate audience. With the book being aimed towards teenagers, the language used is something they can relate to and makes it easier for them to digest the knowledge.

interviews

The interviews I conducted has helped to back up the research I have found through the use of books, journals and articles. The interviews I conducted with 10 students around my university gave me a basic insight into what people of my age thought about the topic of sex education and what their views on what they know and were taught.



The main bulk of answers I received from the students were from the question "with the topics you were taught, did you feel like you had to find a lot of things out for yourself?". With answers ranging from "I wasn't taught anything so I had to" to "yeah they taught me a lot when I was in school".

The answers I received backs up my own thoughts on the curriculum taught in schools, with the topics almost being outdated in a way that they are taught with people not being taught the topics they want, for example, one student said: "I was taught the basics but wasn't really taught stuff that people my age were doing or what people told me they were doing, like the kinky stuff".

This could be argued with that its in books, such as Sex: A Book for Teens : an Uncensored Guide to Your Body, Sex, and Safety and doesn't need to be taught to children.

Another question I asked to the majority of my interviewees was "do you think pornography has played a big part in creating unrealistic expectations?". The answers given by the majority of interviewees were all along the same train of thought. One answer that stood out to me and answered my question in full was from the secondary school teacher who said

"pornography in most recent years has been a gateway into what people think sex is really like. With the expansion of different genres to cater to everyone's interest, it can mask what it is really like. Sex isn't going to be the most pleasurable experience all the time, there will be mishaps and pain in some cases, but with people more open to different things and wanting to experience with their partners or by themselves, porn can help in that way of showing you how to do it. However, people do have to keep in mind that it's not all butterflies and rainbows".

The teacher when speaking to them seemed to talk to me like I was one of their own students, which made me think that when they teach their own students that it's all rehearsed and doesn't allow the students to participate or enjoy the lesson. The answer given sums up the generation as a whole. With the internet being an accessible platform on nearly every device it is easy enough for anyone to access pornography this day and age, backing up the point that the teacher made.

Focus Groups

As for mentioned, I conducted four different focus groups ranging across key stages 2, 3, 4 and 5. Having this range of key stages ranging over the ages of 11 to 18 gives me a deeper insight into what children, teenagers and young adults all think about the subject. The focus groups I had with key stage two and three were basic and in very simple terms. The questions asked had to be catered towards the age the children were.

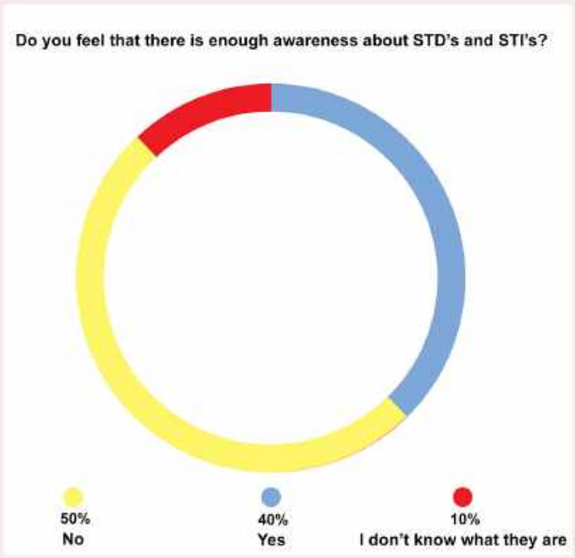
Keeping this in mind I tried to get information that would be useful to me in the future. Two questions I asked were "what have you been taught already?" and "what would you like to be taught?". Simple questions but, ultimately tell me what is being taught to them and what they would like to know at that age. The responses I got from these two questions from this key stage age group reflects on what is being taught at schools. To the first question I got mixed responses with some children saying "I'm not sure" and "we got told about willies and stuff", with responses to the second question getting more in-depth with responses like "what is happening to my body" and the penultimate question "where do babies come from?".

After this focus group, I did a small interview to ask the teachers in these key stages to see if they were meeting their student's needs. Each teacher's response to the question "the students have said that they want to learn about what is happening to their bodies, do you stay with this topic or do you teach other topics as well?". The teacher from key stage 2 responded saying "I try to stick to the curriculum giving as much as I can as I feel the kids aren't ready to learn about things like STD's" and the key stage 3 teacher saying "I want to be as open with my students as much as possible but I don't want backlash from their parents if I tell them something they're not meant to know at this age".

These two responses show that the teachers are almost afraid to teach their students about certain topics as they feel they are too young and immature. However, there seems to be a worry around teaching children what they want to know from different factors being, their parents, the curriculum, and other factors like the area they live and sometimes their religious beliefs.

There are some factors that can get in the way of this, such as religious beliefs, that can stop a child from learning sex education due to their parents not wanting their children to learn it or the children themselves not believing in it themselves through the teachings in their religion.

My focus group with key stage four became more in-depth with the children being of an older age. The answers were more mature in the sense that the students almost knew everything they were being taught already.

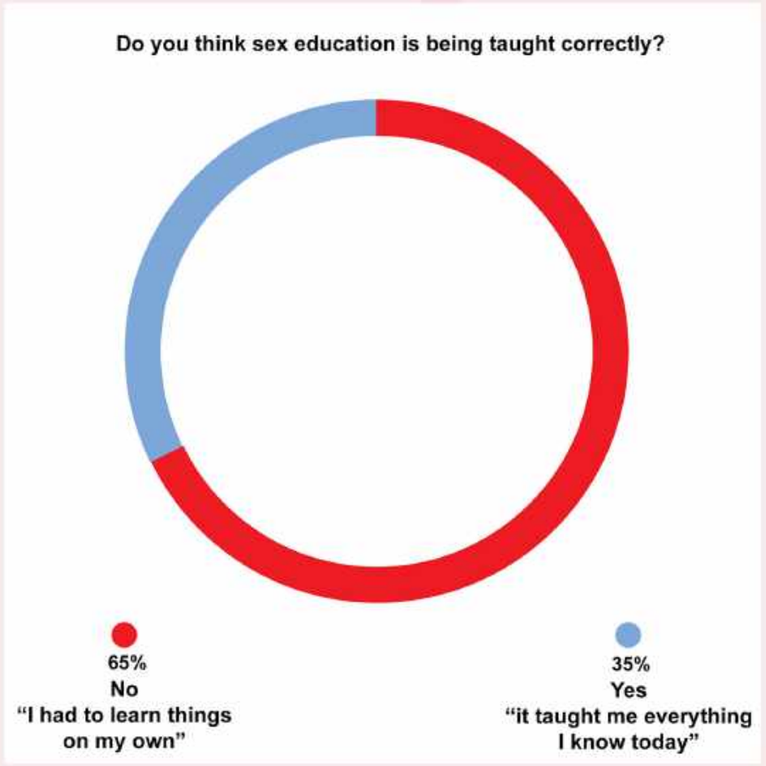


I asked a question around the topic of STD's and STI's and the awareness of them. The responses I received were roughly even with an anomaly being that some students didn't know what STD's or STI's were. This may be from a variety of different circumstances, such as being ill on the day it was taught or not paying attention in class.

To follow up this question I asked the students the same question that I asked key stage two and three "what would you like to be taught?" which responses I thought I wouldn't have received. One response from this question sparked my interest which was "I want to know about different relationships and sexualities as I heard something called asexual from the older kids".

This response caught my attention as I wouldn't have thought a child of that age would have the knowledge of what asexual is. Being asexual is have no sexual desire or attraction towards others. With there being more and more different sexualities now than ever it can get confusing for some people learning the difference. Having children at that age wanting to learn about them shows how far we've come as a generation with everyone wanting to be unique and finding that being different isn't a bad thing anymore.

Nonetheless, my focus group with key stage five delved deeper in the topic, with answers being of an adult-like nature and the students being more open with their answers. The first question I asked them was "Do you think sex education these days is being taught correctly?" which created a big discussion between the students. The responses I got were mixed but, gave me a bigger picture of how these students were taught when they were in school.



The responses were based on their own experiences with sex education in their own schools. With the students being aged between 16 and 18 they all had different experiences due to being from different schools and each being taught differently. With the majority of responses being no, there seemed to be a running theme with the responses given.

Most of the students agreed when one student said "nah I don't think it's being taught correctly. When I was in school all I got taught was the basics like std's and contraception. Kids these days need to know about bigger problems that happen like HIV and inequality with society". This then sparked a big discussion on inequality within society which began to get a bit heated.

With this generation being labelled as the "snowflake generation" which describes the young adults of the 2010s to be less resilient and more prone to taking offence to certain comments or actions, it can be difficult when talking about subjects such as sexuality and equality. A student in this focus group said "I think there is enough talk in schools about equality" which was interrupted by another student who said, "no, not at all, there is literally nothing these days on this, when I was in school we had nothing on equality and sexuality leaving most of us basically clueless with what we identify as".

This comment got me thinking, not just about how some people can think there isn't enough about equality in which can be made up of different factors, such as their upbringing or what they were taught in school, but the word "identify".

With this generation being more open than others about their sexualities, identifying as something for instance, pansexual, gay or transgender can be a big part of some people's personalities and what makes them who they are.

Summary

With all the research I've conducted over the past few weeks, it has taught me a lot of things I didn't necessarily know around the topic. Having my own presumptions on the topic being something on the side to be taught to fill up time gave me a basis on something to go off to start my research and dig deeper into the topic.

The research has given me a lot of insight into the topics and different opinions spread over different generations. Each one giving me useful research into the topic and what could be improved or expanded on. In regards to this it has given me a few key points I could look into;

- How the curriculum could be changed or better suited towards the student's needs and wants
- The awareness of HIV and AIDS and the treatment to help with the issue
- Could there be more instructional material, such as books or videos to help people with topics people want to learn about

Revised Research Question

"How could the topic of sex education be improved to create a fun and engaging way of teaching younger children topics better suited for adults?"

With all of this in mind my original research question "to explore the topic of sex education" had to be revised. Looking back at it now it is too vague as doesn't give me a direct path into a problem that needs to be addressed or changed. This in turn, gave me the chance to change my research question to something that I could explore deeper and create a solution that could someday help people in the future and revolutionize the topic of sex education.

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