

# Young People's Voices: Relationships, Health and Sex Education

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# **Young People's Voices: Relationships, Health and Sex Education**

**Author: Dr Sophie King-Hill**

**2024**

## **Executive Summary**

This report outlines the feedback from a number of steering groups of young people in response to relationships, sex and health education (RSHE). In response to the Department for Education (DfE) planning the best approach of how to engage with young people, and bring their voices into the process, the DfE welcomed an offer from Brook to convene young people's perspectives to inform the draft RSHE guidance. Brook then coordinated a range of stakeholders to carry out steering groups, these included young people from Brook's own participation forum, schools, Sexpression:UK, Girlguiding and SafeLives. Across all of these groups a range of 27 young people aged 10-25 were spoken to about their experiences of RSHE to gain insight and steer from them to outline what is important to young people that needs to be included in RSHE and to provide insight into the important factors that need consideration in relation to the new draft guidance for RSHE. The secondary data from the steering group responses were then analysed by King-Hill using thematic content analysis. Whilst the number of young people taking part in the study is minimal it provides a vital perspective on what young people need and are experiencing in relation to RSHE.

It is important to note that the themes that emerged from the steering groups strongly reflect and align with a vast amount of robust research findings, from a range of fields, that set out what young people need from RSHE to provide them with the information required to support their well-being and to keep them healthy and safe. Research studies in this area also highlights the importance of listening to young people when considering what is required for adequate RSHE.

## **Aim**

To gain insight from a range of young people, via a number of steering groups, on relationships, sex and health education (RHSE) and what more needs to be considered for the new draft guidance to fully address the needs of young people.

## **Objectives**

The objectives of the steering groups were to understand:

- 1) What are young people's experiences of RSHE to date.
- 2) What are the enablers for effective RSHE.
- 3) What are the barriers to effective RSHE.
- 4) What more can be done to ensure that RSHE is meeting the needs of young people.

## Findings

- **RSHE is boring:** The steering groups feedback indicated that the delivery of was 'boring' and the young people were treated as passive learners in the pedagogical process rather than active participants that were experts in their world.
- **RSHE is one-sided:** RSHE experiences were 'one-sided'. On many occasions the young people were told what they can and can't do in relation to sex and relationships and little consideration was given to their own specific and contextual needs and experiences.
- **The importance of the educator:** Successful RSHE is dependent upon the skills, knowledge and approach of the educator/teacher. This is a key component in successful and effective RSHE sessions.
- **Shame:** There was a large element of shame to RSHE which inhibited learning and reinforced the position that sex, especially, is something to be embarrassed about. With RSHE fostering awkwardness around sex.
- **Lack of RSHE provision:** Many of the young people indicated that they could not comment on RSHE as they had not received any teaching on this in their educational experiences and that RSHE was self-taught from varied sources that did not include school/college.
- **Lack of diversity in RSHE:** There was a lack of diversity in RSHE teaching approaches that the young people had received which inhibited learning.
- **Lack of participatory teaching styles:** Linking to a lack of confident and effective teachers. Those that had RSHE found that is instructional and not participatory which fostered shame due to the awkwardness felt by many educators which translated to the young peoples perspectives on relationships and sex. Additionally, some of the young people totally lacked any RSHE throughout their educational journey.
- **Practical sessions and the importance of educator skill:** Practical sessions were memorable both positively and negatively and dependent on how they were framed and taught.
- **RSHE is heteronormative:** The heteronormative nature of the RSHE the young people received was highlighted on numerous occasions. Any sessions offered on LGBTQ+ were perceived as an add on, rather than integrated within incremental teaching on RSHE.
- **Lacking LGBTQ+ (including gender) education:** The young people indicated that they want more of this education at a much younger age. It was felt that this should be incremental and build throughout the school journey. Some of the responses

indicated that sexuality was taught but gender was omitted. They felt that this would have been a useful component of RSHE.

- **Sexism:** Examples of sexism in RSHE were given in the steering groups (i.e only teaching about male masturbation for example and framing boys as perpetrators and girls as victims without further explorations of the nuances of the issue of VAWG). Additionally, It was highlighted that boys and girls were often split to learn about different aspect of RSHE and that this was counterproductive and fosters divides and reinforces gender as binary.
- **Too little, too late:** RSHE has to start from a young age and be incremental for it to be effective. It was highlighted that many aspects of RSHE should be taught before exposure to the internet. RSHE did not incrementally develop with them and they were taught the same things each year. The young people indicated that in many instances they were being taught what they already know.
- **Pleasure:** RSHE was not found to be contextualised within personal pleasure and that many sessions were geared around fear and putting young people off relationships and sexual activity. This again fosters shame and awkwardness around sex and relationships and inhibits key conversations on the various topics in relation to this and individual sexual well-being.
- **Period Education:** Period education being too late was a key theme that emerged from the reposes. Many of the young people felt that this was often after young people had started their periods, which was counter-productive and compounded the shame and taboo around periods..
- **A lack of young person input into RSHE:** The majority of young people on the steering groups had never been asked what should be included in the RSHE that they were receiving. A key element running through the responses was the eagerness of the young people to contribute and support the design of good RSHE.
- **Safe spaces:** Good RSHE provision provides safe spaces whereby young people can explore the issues around RSHE that concern them.

## Recommendations

- **Listen to young people:** Young people need to contribute to RSHE for it to be effective.
- **Early RSHE:** RSHE has to start from a young age and be incremental for it to be effective.

- **The importance of diverse teaching methods in RSHE:** Diverse teaching methods and approaches has to underpin RSHE to enhance successful outcomes and positively impact upon the lives of young people.
- **LGBTQ+ inclusive:** all RSHE needs to include information about LGBTQ+ people..
- **Gender inclusive:** all RSHE needs to include information and education on different genders.
- **RSHE needs to be taken seriously:** RSHE has to be on a par with other subjects so that it gains credibility.

**Teacher/educator training:** Educators in RSHE, whether from a school/college or an outside agency, have to be fully trained, knowledgeable and approachable.

## Summary

From the responses the young people highlighted that they want safe, unbiased, inclusive spaces to be created in which they can learn about RSHE. RSHE needs to start earlier and be led by the young people and be designed and based around what they need. They indicated the need for good educators that are skilled in RSHE education, whether that be outside agencies or in house teaching staff with specific skills and training in RSHE. The responses to this discussion also highlighted the need for LGBTQ+ education (including gender) to be mandatory and woven into RSHE rather than a stand-alone component. They also indicated that they want more, not less, LGBTQ+ education. Pleasure was indicated to be a vital component that is missing in many sessions, as is the choice not to have sex. They also indicated a need for there to be more focus upon relationships from an early age. The responses also demonstrated that the young people felt that RSHE needs to be taken as seriously as other subjects and that they should be taught in mixed gender classes. They specified that sessions for parents and carers would be helpful to align school with home. The responses also indicated that young people want good RSHE to keep them safe and to support them in negotiating the world around them.

## Introduction

This report outlines the feedback from a number of steering groups of young people in response to relationships, sex and health education (RSHE). In response to the Department for Education (DfE) planning the best approach of how to engage with young people, and bring their voices into the process, the DfE welcomed an offer from Brook to convene young people's perspectives to inform the draft RSHE guidance. Brook then coordinated a range of stakeholders to carry out steering groups, these included young people from Brook's own participation forum, schools, Sexpression:UK, Girlguiding and SafeLives. Across all of these groups a range of 27 young people aged 10-25 were spoken to about their experiences of RSHE to gain insight and steer from them to outline what is important to young people that needs to be included in RSHE and to provide insight into the important factors that need consideration in relation to the new draft guidance for RSHE. The secondary data from the steering group responses were then analysed by King-Hill using thematic content analysis. Whilst the number of young people taking part in the study is minimal it provides a vital perspective on what young people need and are experiencing in relation to RSHE.

It is important to note that the themes that emerged from the steering groups strongly reflect and align with a vast amount of robust research findings, from a range of fields, that set out what young people need from RSHE to provide them with the information required to support their well-being and to keep them healthy and safe. Research studies in this area also highlights the importance of listening to young people when considering what is required for adequate RSHE (see indicative reference list).

There is a wealth of evidence that supports robust and well planned Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) examples of this evidence is given in this document in relation to the voices of young people. The voices of children and young people should be central to this and be a theme that runs through all work in this area. The sources of RSHE for children and young people are wide and varied and RSHE in an education setting should build upon this knowledge, driven by young people as they are the experts in the world that they live in. Fixed limits on

information can inhibit what is realistically required to fully support the learning of children and young people in RSHE, and a lack of flexibility in this can compromise safeguarding. Scaling back RSHE would result in long term, lifelong negative outcomes for many children and young people. Good RSHE can prevent and reduce child sexual abuse, sibling sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation. Strict parameters and a lack of flexibility on this is proven not to work and results in barriers to reporting which compromises safeguarding and increases the risk of sexual harm. Young people indicate in numerous research studies that good and realistic RSHE can create safe spaces for children and young people to both recognise and report sexual harm. To inhibit or halt education on diversity would be incredibly damaging to all children and young people who naturally want to explore the world around them and their own identity within this. Teaching around all matters linked to LGBTQ+ acceptance and issues is vital and to take this out, or rollback would be damaging on multiple levels. Teaching children and young people about diverse communities is vital for the well-being of all pupils – young people tell us this consistently. It is the right of children and young people to have access to robust and realistic RSHE. The voices of children and young people should drive considerations in relation to the review as they are key stakeholders and their input in what is required of RSHE is crucial.

### **Aim**

To gain insight from a range of young people, via a number of steering groups, on relationships, sex and health education (RHSE) and what more needs to be considered for the new draft guidance to fully address the needs of young people.

### **Objectives**

The objectives of the steering groups were to understand:

- 1) What are young people's experiences of RSHE to date.
- 2) What are the enablers for effective RSHE.
- 3) What are the barriers to effective RSHE.
- 4) What more can be done to ensure that RSHE is meeting the needs of young people.



## Methodology

The secondary data responses from the steering groups were analysed using content analysis, which was chosen as it employs a systematic structure to interpret the written word (Cohen et al, 2008). Krippendorp (2004, p18) asserts that it is a 'research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts' resulting in the interpretation of these results for a wider audience. Ethical approval for the use of the secondary data provided from the steering groups was obtained from the University of Birmingham.

The steps used for this process were followed using the suggestions by Cohen et al (2008) which consisted of a four stage process which are detailed in the table below.

## Analysis

<b>Stage one – Coding</b>	Responses coded and sorted into categories
<b>Stage two – Sorting</b>	Sorting responses into key headings and areas
<b>Stage 3 – Themes</b>	Frequency that each item is referred to develop main themes and subordinate themes. Main themes are classified as the majority of the responses for that particular code
<b>Stage 4 – Comments and review</b>	Review and commentary on the themes that were found

The systematic content analysis in for these responses allowed for them to be condensed into specific themes in an iterative process which included combing and reducing codes and introducing new ones when necessary (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

## Methods

The methods employed consisted of steering groups with directed questions and the answers were noted by the lead. These responses were then documented in pre-designed response capture sheets for consistency.

## Sample

The sample consisted of a total of N= 27 young people aged between 10-24. Demographic detail for where the steering groups took place have been omitted and demographic data has been separated to prevent identification of the young people.

The full breakdown of young people is outlined in the tables below:

### Ages

n =	Age
1	16
5	18
4	19
2	20
2	21
1	23
1	22
1	25
7	10-15(Ages not specified other than range given) *school group
3	16-19(Ages not specified other than range given)

### Gender

n =	Gender
19	Not known
1	Non-binary
5	Female
2	Questioning

### Religiosity

n =	Religiosity
1	Muslim
2	Catholic (complicated)
1	Hindu (complicated)
1	Spiritual
1	Agnostic
1	Atheist
20	Not known

### Ethnicity

n =	Ethnicity
5	White British
1	Indian
5	Asian British
1	Chinses

15	Not known
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## Sexuality

n =	Sexuality
4	Heterosexual
4	Bisexual
1	Lesbian
18	Not known

## Findings and Recommendations

The findings and discussion will be presented with a subheading for each question with the findings from the responses given and discussed.

### **Question one: If you could think of 1-3 words to describe your experiences of Relationships, and Sex Education what would they be?**

The responses received for this question consisted of the three chosen words and notes on the follow up discussion. From the responses received from all 27 young people N=6 themes emerged:

<b>Theme: Question one</b>
Boring
One-sided
Teacher dependent
Shameful
Non-existent
Lacking diversity

#### **Theme one: Boring**

This theme indicated that the delivery of was 'boring' and the young people were treated as passive learners in the pedagogical process rather than active participants that were experts in their world. Teaching styles in this cohort appeared to lend themselves to a behaviourist, rather than a constructivist approach. The young people indicated that approach is flawed when educating on RSHE as the information is not readily absorbed and learning does not take place effectively as the topics taught and approaches utilised were inadequate and unrealistic.

#### **Theme two: One sided**

A second theme that arose from the responses was that of their RSHE experiences being 'one-sided'. This stems from the RSHE they experienced appearing to be instructional rather than participatory. The responses indicate that on many occasions the young people were told what they can and can't do in relation to sex and relationships and little consideration was given to their own specific and contextual needs and experiences. With educators talking 'at' them rather than with them. This then appeared to lead to confusion as exposure to negative and positive content without a two way understanding and discussion. It was

highlighted that this is in the context of many mixed messages and varied content that they were accessing on the internet.

### **Theme three: Teacher Dependent**

RSHE appeared to be dependent on the individual teacher. This resulted in positive and negative experiences and outcomes. For some, RSHE was useful, new and exciting and for others it was 'horrifically bad'. Upon exploration of the comments it emerged that these experiences were directly linked to the teacher that was delivering the RSHE. When a teacher was confident and knowledgeable RSHE sessions were fun and useful. This supports the view that teachers who teach RSHE do need specific training due to the complex and multi-faceted nature of the topic. When considering this aspect only surface learning appears to have taken place and there is a need for deep learning to take place which will enhance decision making skills of the young people being taught.

### **Theme four: Shameful**

Many of the responses from the young people indicated that there was a shame element to RSHE which inhibited learning and reinforced the position that sex is something to be embarrassed about. Some responses indicated that the sessions they had in RSHE made them feel awkward, unsafe and daunted. The shame generated in those lessons meant it was not a safe environment for them to talk about issues that impact them in a. Shame shuts down valuable conversation and therefore risks preventing young people from accessing vital information that can keep them safe.

### **Theme five: Non-existent**

The theme of RSHE not featuring within educational experiences emerged from the responses. Many of the young people indicated that they could not comment on RSHE as they had not received any teaching on this in their educational experiences and that RSHE was self-taught from varied sources that did not include school/college.

### **Theme six: Lacking diversity**

The responses indicated that there was a lack of diversity in the teaching methods and approaches that the young people had received. This theme, in the responses, is resultant of a lack of confident and effective teachers, RSHE that is instructional and not participatory and that foster shame or stemmed from a total lack of RSHE throughout the educational journey of the young people.

**Question two: Can you provide us with a memorable moment from RSE (good or bad)**

<b>Theme</b>
Non-Existent
Teacher dependent
Practical sessions memorable (negative and positive)
Heteronormative
Sexist

**Theme one: Non-existent**

This theme emerged again in responses to this question. Many of the young people were unable to comment as they did not receive any RSHE throughout their time in the education system. This is viewed by the young people responding as negative and they highlighted that they would have welcomed good RSHE throughout their time in education.

**Theme two: Teacher Dependent**

This key theme arose again in the responses to question two. Many of the examples given were embedded in the context of the teaching style and approach by the teacher. This lent itself to RSHE being 'forgettable' and 'clinical'. There were also comments that demonstrated that when RSHE is seen as a class that is not essential then this translates both to the teaching and to young people's perception of RSHE as not being essential. Another key element that arose is that of the teachers' comfort when teaching, it was indicated that when a teacher is uncomfortable and embarrassed this translates to the young people being taught.

**Theme three: Practical sessions memorable**

The responses demonstrated that the practical sessions were memorable both positively and negatively. Being straightforward and light-hearted appeared to be a key approach that was enjoyed by the young people i.e the consent and tea video (although this does have its flaws it can trigger valuable conversation). Yet this video also drew criticism – that it did not account for the seriousness of the issue and was not accompanied by any robust teaching around it.

The condom demonstration attracted negative and positive responses. The positive responses were underpinned by the active learning element of the activity and the range of learning outcomes that were met i.e Kitemark, use by dates etc. The negative aspects were drawn from it being seen as a pointless activity that fostered embarrassment (this may be teacher dependent but this was not made explicit). It was also felt that in the practical sessions STIs were used to scare young people into not having sex. Seeing the contraception was seen as useful due to the active learning element.

#### **Theme four: Heteronormative**

A aspect that arose from this question was the heteronormative nature of the RSHE the young people received. Rather than focus upon a memorable session the focus was upon what was lacking for the LGBTQ+ community. Any sessions offered were perceived as an add on, rather than integrated within incremental teaching on RSHE. This non-inclusive approach appeared to exclude some of the young people who did not see RSHE as being for them and fostered feelings of shame, closing down conversation and safe spaces to ask questions.

#### **Theme five: Sexist**

Sexism as a theme emerged and examples were given though the teaching the young people had received. It was highlighted that boys and girls were often split to learn about different aspect of RSHE and that this was counterproductive and fosters division. It was also pointed out that, in their experience, boys are told not to sexually harass and girls are taught to not be victims, rather than unpicking issues across all genders. Another aspect of a sexist approach emerged in relation to masturbation as only being seen for boys and male masturbation being focussed on and 'penis centric' teaching such as putting condom on a demonstrator. This then fostered shame for those that are not male.

#### **Question three: Can you think of examples of topics that were taught to you and your peers (or friends) at the wrong time?**

Six themes emerged from the responses to this question:

Theme
Non-existent
Too little, too late
Teacher dependent
Pleasure
LGBTQ+ (including gender)
Periods

**Theme one: Non-existent**

Again, this theme emerged as many of the young people felt that they could not comment as they had received no RSHE throughout their time in education. They indicated that they would have welcomed developmentally appropriate RSHE from a young age, giving examples such as consent and period education.

**Theme two: Too little, too late**

Too little, too late was a clear theme running through the responses to this question. It was highlighted that many aspects of RSHE should be taught before exposure to the internet. Some highlighted that they did not learn about consent and relationships until sixth form, which they indicated was too late for them, which in turn meant the sessions were not taken seriously. Pornography was another key element of this theme with the responses indicating that there was not enough education on this prior to young people accessing it. Some responses indicated that their RSHE did not incrementally develop with them and they were taught the same things each year. The young people indicated that in many instances they were being taught what they already know.

**Theme three: Teacher Dependent**

Again, in response to this question this theme emerged. That learning in RSHE is heavily dependent upon the teaching style and approach of the educator. Responses talked of the awkwardness and/or boredom that was generated when a teacher was embarrassed or dismissive of the topic.

**Theme four: Pleasure**

The responses from the young people indicated that RSHE was not contextualised within personal pleasure and that many sessions were geared around fear and putting young people off relationships and sexual activity. This again fosters shame and awkwardness around sex and relationships and inhibits key conversations on the various topics in relation to this and individual sexual well-being.

**Theme five: LGBTQ+ (including gender)**

The key theme of LGBTQ+ (including gender) emerged from the responses. With the young people indicating that they want more of this education at a much younger age. It was felt that this should be incremental and be built upon throughout the school journey. Some of the responses indicated that sexuality was taught but gender was omitted. They felt that this would have been a useful component of RSHE.



## Theme six: Periods

Period education being too late was emerged from the responses. The young people indicated that education on menstruation was often after young people had started their periods, which was counter-productive and compounded the shame and taboo around periods.

### Question four: Were you ever asked by your school about what should be included in the RSE curriculum?

The one theme arising from these responses is that the young people had never been asked what should be included in the RSHE that they were receiving. Some indicated that they were asked for feedback following the sessions but felt it was not acted upon and felt tokenistic. Also, when they were asked young people reported feeling too awkward and embarrassed to speak up and highlight what more could be done to enhance RSHE (whilst not made explicit – this appears to be linked to teacher approaches). A recognition of the different contexts across genders was also present – with young people knowing that they are the experts in the world that they live in today many suggestions of what can be done arose from the responses such as:

Anonymous questionnaires
Focus groups
Openness to questions and suggestions
The need for safe spaces
Youth advisers (consisting of older, young people)
Student consultation
Student feedback to governors
Flexibility to change

A key element running through the responses to question four was the eagerness of the young people to contribute and support the design of good RSHE. Across the responses it is implied that they are eager to learn about all aspects of RSHE and it is very much wanted and needed.

### Question five: General discussion

The fifth component from the questioning was an open opportunity for a general discussion on any of the points raised and to allow space for young people to highlight any other key points that may have been missed.

The young people highlighted that they want safe, unbiased, inclusive spaces to be created in which they can learn about RSHE. RSHE needs to start earlier and be led by the young

people and be designed and based around what they indicate they need. They indicated the need for good educators that are skilled in RSHE education, whether that be outside agencies or in house teaching staff with specific skills and training in RSHE. The responses to this discussion also highlighted the need for LGBTQ+ education (including gender) to be mandatory and woven into RSHE rather than a stand-alone component. They also indicated that they want more, not less, LGBTQ+ education. Pleasure was indicated to be a vital component that is missing in many sessions, as is the choice not to have sex. They also indicated a need for there to be more focus upon relationships from an early age. The responses also demonstrated that the young people felt that RSHE needs to be taken as seriously as other subjects and that they should be taught in mixed gender classes. They specified that sessions for parents and carers would be helpful to align school with home. The responses also indicated that young people want good RSHE to keep them safe and to support them in negotiating the world around them.

## Summary

### Findings

- **RSHE is boring:** The steering groups feedback indicated that the delivery of was 'boring' and the young people were treated as passive learners in the pedagogical process rather than active participants that were experts in their world.
- **RSHE is one-sided:** RSHE experiences were 'one-sided'. On many occasions the young people were told what they can and can't do in relation to sex and relationships and little consideration was given to their own specific and contextual needs and experiences.
- **The importance of the educator:** Successful RSHE is dependent upon the skills, knowledge and approach of the educator/teacher. This is a key component in successful and effective RSHE sessions.
- **Shame:** There was a large element of shame to RSHE which inhibited learning and reinforced the position that sex, especially, is something to be embarrassed about. With RSHE fostering awkwardness around sex.
- **Lack of RSHE provision:** Many of the young people indicated that they could not comment on RSHE as they had not received any teaching on this in their educational experiences and that RSHE was self-taught from varied sources that did not include school/college.
- **Lack of diversity in RSHE:** There was a lack of diversity in RSHE teaching approaches that the young people had received which inhibited learning.
- **Lack of participatory teaching styles:** Linking to a lack of confident and effective teachers. Those that had RSHE found that is instructional and not participatory which fostered shame due to the awkwardness felt by many educators which translated to the young peoples perspectives on relationships and sex. Additionally, some of the young people totally lacked any RSHE throughout their educational journey.
- **Practical sessions and the importance of educator skill:** Practical sessions were memorable both positively and negatively and dependent on how they were framed and taught.
- **RSHE is heteronormative:** The heteronormative nature of the RSHE the young people received was highlighted on numerous occasions. Any sessions offered on LGBTQ+ were perceived as an add on, rather than integrated within incremental teaching on RSHE.
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indicated that sexuality was taught but gender was omitted. They felt that this would have been a useful component of RSHE.

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- **Too little, too late:** RSHE has to start from a young age and be incremental for it to be effective. It was highlighted that many aspects of RSHE should be taught before exposure to the internet. RSHE did not incrementally develop with them and they were taught the same things each year. The young people indicated that in many instances they were being taught what they already know.
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- **Safe spaces:** Good RSHE provision provides safe spaces whereby young people can explore the issues around RSHE that concern them.

## Recommendations

- **Listen to young people:** Young people need to contribute to RSHE for it to be effective.
- **Early RSHE:** RSHE has to start from a young age and be incremental for it to be effective.

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**Teacher/educator training:** Educators in RSHE, whether from a school/college or an outside agency, have to be fully trained, knowledgeable and approachable.

## Summary

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**Indicative reference list and research that aligns with the findings of this report.**

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