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Explore – Students Exploring Marriage: † submission to Education Committee Inquiry into PSHE and SRE

* House of Commons Education Select Committee

A Executive Summary

1. "Explore" is a charity established in 2000, with a methodology devised by The Grubb Institute using the approach of The Tavistock Centre for Couple Relations
2. Explore has set up a network of representatives, to give workshops in schools (and some prisons, and youth clubs). We currently operate in schools across 10 counties of England, including London and Birmingham, serving more than 70 schools and 6,000 young people each year. Explore employs 10 staff, and about 60 volunteers. Over time, we have spoken directly to more than 50,000 young people on the subject of their long-term relationships. This quantum of knowledge is greater than any research that has been conducted in this area, and we believe our knowledge of this subject is second to none.
3. For nearly 15 years, Explore has been addressing a need that is widely identified – for positive education to be given to all 15-18 year olds about the everyday realities of mainstream long-term relationships. Ours is a direct response to address the R requirement of SRE that we believe is otherwise subject to widespread neglect in schools.
4. In this submission to the Education Committee, Explore offers a proven developed and productive methodology that addresses the primary objective of the R in SRE. It should be applied across all schools.

B Clarification:

1. Across the field of SRE, education about S for Sex is usually quite well-provided in schools; and there is as well widespread instruction on anti-discrimination and anti-bullying. Additionally, techniques are sometimes given on better communication and conflict resolution. Several charities exist to reinforce these initiatives: they support the rights of minorities, they address the needs of young people in the context of relationships that have broken down: and they train teachers to handle them.
2. Explore is apart from all that. It is concerned with the one important area that is left uncovered by all those initiatives: the reality of long-term relationships, and how they manage to work. No-one else appears to be looking at this. On many occasions over several years, research has indicated, and social leaders have acknowledged, that the R for Relationship issues are simply not being addressed in schools at all. And, even when an attempt is made, it tends to cover short-term matters such as the preliminaries of consensual respectful sex.
3. The reality is that a key element of SRE is being neglected; that the responsible parties are shy of addressing it; and - as we can confirm on a daily basis - young people are hungry for knowledge reassurance and hope on this vital matter of their lives.
4. Explore is different, because:
 - i) In its scope Explore addresses itself to *all* students – not just those identified as vulnerable
 - ii) In its contact Explore people work *directly* with young people – giving them a new channel of knowledge not moderated by teachers or parents
 - iii) In its subject matter Explore sessions tend to dwell on matters that the other charities -and parents and teachers –do *not* articulate: such as love, trust, companionship, compromise, forgiveness, families, caring. Explore sessions examine how such long-term values are used to build and sustain relationships. We believe few other SRE sessions do that.

iv) In its openness Explore is entirely non-judgemental, and has no message or prescriptions at all to impart. It is not bound by any policy restrictions. This is because its whole method is based on dialogue led by the students

v) In its importance Explore addresses directly the very first topic mentioned in the DofE's own guideline definition of SRE, which is:

"SRE... is about the understanding of the importance of marriage for family life, stable and loving relationships, respect, love and care".

We believe no other SRE sessions do that.

vi) In its value The Explore experience is transformative, often delivered in just one session. Users – students and their PSHE teachers – give very high marks for its quality and value.

In fact, the oft-cited exemplar by Ofsted of the best practice in the sector is at John Henry Newman School in Stevenage. This school has no connection with Explore, but we note it uses a pale form of the Explore method - and it receives slightly lower satisfaction ratings.

vii) In its cost-effectiveness Explore is mostly provided by volunteers. It is a standalone service, best provided when it complements a substantial longer-term curriculum in a school for the development of pupils' emotional well-being.

An Explore session can be regarded as a remote precursor to the approach adopted by Marriage Care, whose work was evaluated by the DofE's paper in Jan 2014 as delivering social value *1.1 times* the cost of the service.

5. Taking these points together, we believe Explore to be (A) unique; (B) to the point; (C) universally applicable; and (D) highly valued. We submit it represents a vital step for all young people to get the knowhow and the hope to embark on successful relationships themselves.
6. Further information on Explore is available on the website www.theexploreexperience.com and in particular the 7 minute video included there. References are available from our patrons and recent speakers at our Annual Lecture, including:

Justice Paul Coleridge
Archbishop Peter Smith
Headmaster Anthony Seldon
Iain Duncan-Smith PC MP
Rev Les Isaac, founder Street Pastors

C The Explore Approach

1. Unlike most other activities in a school classroom, Explore sessions are conducted on collegiate lines. The topics, the pace and the depth of Explore discussions are determined by the students themselves. This is *experiential learning*, and it is unbounded by the kinds of preset rules and restrictions that are typical in schools. The quality of the outcome of an Explore session is slightly different for each student present, since it depends on their own personal background and what contribution they themselves make in the session.
2. A second feature that is unusual in a school setting is the sense of authentic intimacy in the exchange. With a near-anonymity of participants, and no hierarchy of knowledge, there is in an Explore session a strong sense of curiosity openness and trust. Again, this sense of freedom of expression is unusual in a school setting. The intended sharing of personal experience is enhanced by this arrangement.

3. The rationale for this approach is the belief that children's knowledge on relationships and family values should ideally come from their own parents and families. The Explore methodology attempts to recreate such an atmosphere of authentic role example.

D Running Order of an Explore half-day workshop:

1. The routine is as follows:

10 minute overview: Explore is introduced and presented to the full 150 pupils of a year group

20 minutes preparation: once the year group is broken up into classes of 20 or 25 pupils, an Explore representative joins each one to invite classes to consider the issues and questions they might raise once the main dialogue commences. In this process, pupils will normally identify a range of 8 or 10 different 'hopes and fears' they might imagine they have about the prospect of long term relationships for them in their futures. Frequently, they might identify: choosing a prospective partner; first sex; co-habiting vis a vis marriage; recognising incompatibility; dealing with matters of violence or infidelity; boredom; handling decisions about children, money and jobs. These would be their topics, and we are always impressed by the breadth of the concerns raised.

This part of the exercise is just to raise and channel their ideas, no suggestions are made by the Explore rep.

45 minute dialogue: with the Explore rep then sitting to one side, a volunteer couple introduced by Explore is brought into the class. They offer to answer any and all questions the pupils may have about their own long term relationship. One by one, pupils speak up and ask personal questions. They might refer to the 'hopes and fears' they prepared beforehand, as prompts to find out about the couple and their own story.

Typically, the atmosphere is electric as the young people learn how in this one single case a couple of people have managed to face up to the everyday trials and realities of their own adult existence. In this session, no questions are refused, although the couple may of course decline to respond. The one rule we do have applies to the couple: - to keep their remarks specific to their own experience, with no generalisations or advice to be added.

The space of 45 minutes allows for all the topics to be raised, with time for reflection and follow-on questions. It also permits the class to make some judgements about the couple's behaviour and values, and how they treat each other.

10 minute summary after the couple have withdrawn, the Explore rep acts as a moderator to assist the students to reflect on what they learned

-Then a second volunteer couple would be introduced, and a fresh round of enquiries directed to them in turn

5 minute roundup all the classes reassembled in the full year group, to share their summaries with each other.

Debriefing of pupils, of volunteer couples, and of Explore reps Feedback forms to rate the event, raise comments and draw some conclusions.

2. As a general observation, the feedback forms Explore receives back from the students indicate good awareness of the issues that can threaten relationships. They also suggest large areas of prior ignorance about some positive aspects of relationships, and how strong forbearance, flexibility and tolerance can be. The students demonstrate considerable openness of mind, and emotional sensitivity, to take good advantage of the pair of case studies that are offered.

3. Many – typically 80-85% attest to the transformative effect of a single Explore session. They make specific remarks to indicate they can apply what they've learned to their own lives, and proceed with more reassurance and hope. The website gives examples of this feedback.

E Opportunities for Explore

1. The essence of Explore is (i) its knowhow, and (ii) its volunteers. The knowhow is to create an atmosphere of trust for young people to learn for themselves about the application of values in a relationship to make it work. The volunteers are to provide authentic and disinterested examples of lasting relationships, which the young people will accept and apply to their own situations.
2. For Explore to expand its activities, two conditions are needed:
 - (i) *Creation of time* in the school curriculum for Explore to apply its knowhow. Half a day for each secondary school pupil to experience an Explore event is not great. And that time would be even better spent if the Explore experience is provided in conjunction with a range of other classes on emotional development.
 - (ii) *Volunteers*. Once schools adopt – in conjunction with governors and parents- a genuine strategy for teaching the R of SRE, then the ground will be more fertile for raising volunteer couples. These would not be to serve in their own local schools, of course, but maybe elsewhere in the area.
3. The knowhow of Explore can be shared and propagated for application on a wider scale. Under our own steam, we are already doing this, and expanding 20 percent pa. into half a dozen further LEAs at any one time. With official recognition or support, it could be so much greater.

The knowhow of Explore can also be modified, to enable it to dovetail in with other initiatives on the SRE agenda.

F Threats to Explore

1. Over nearly 20 years, Explore succeeded where it has despite a lack of conviction in many schools that action is needed in this field. Despite official guidance, frequently expressed public concern, and the clear need of their own young people, the large majority of schools have been distracted from attending to this vital responsibility.
2. Explore has been dependent on its volunteers and the financial support of certain private donors. Limited resources are the only restriction to Explore's continuing expansion in fulfilment of its national potential.
3. One immediate additional threat is the uncertainty surrounding the representation of same-sex marriage. The recent statements of the Department and the advice of the EHRC are perfectly clear. However, for fear of being criticised by one interest group or another, we find that schools are using a perceived uncertainty in the situation as one more reason to do nothing about their obligation to provide their pupils with relationship education.

Explore's own position on this and most other subjects is neutral. We have no policy or prescription ourselves to recommend, and we respect the experiences and values of all the people we meet.

It is for individual schools – in conjunction with parents - to determine the exact content of the SRE programmes they offer. Our experience is that Explore can comply without difficulty. And it is for individual students at Explore sessions to ask what questions they like, and to make follow-up remarks in their written feedback to us.

Explore's approach is to offer married couples as volunteers that represent identifiable examples of committed lasting relationship. Across 70 schools this year, and 50,000 students overall, this is accepted for what it is worth.

G Summary

1. The existing DoFE curriculum and guidelines remain valid, because there is a national requirement to respond to general public concerns about family breakdown, uncontrolled internet porn, and a sense of alienation among young people and lack of close role models in today's society.
2. The implementation of that requirement over 14 years has been quite unsatisfactory. In fact, there are sufficient delicacies in the subject matter to suggest it can never be prescribed by government, or taught by teachers.
3. Explore is a grassroots solution to the problem of teaching about relationships in a classroom. It works, and merits broader support.

H Recommendations

**Whether PSHE ought to be statutory, either as part of the National Curriculum or through some other means of entitlement.*

Response: PSHE is too broad a subject. The factual part should all be included in the subject curricula, and the behavioural aspects within the area of school ethos and discipline.

Matters of emotional wellbeing have never been (i) well-codified or (ii) implemented in schools.

(i) The codification should be a mandatory subject for the school governors to prescribe on a local basis.

Then, in accordance with such local strategies,

(ii) the implementation can be supplied at least in part by external organisations. Approved local providers (such as Explore or, in the cases of faith schools, their church), can bid to contribute accordingly. Youth clubs and scout groups might also be well-placed to contribute to this kind of personal development.

**Whether the current accountability system is sufficient to ensure that schools focus on PSHE.*

Response: Clearly not. The requirements have not been met in years, and no corrective action has been taken.

**The overall provision of Sex and Relationships Education in schools and the quality of its teaching, including in primary schools and academies.*

Response: As indicated above, it appears that matters of sex and short-term behavioural rules are increasingly well-taught across the age range. Falling rates of teenage pregnancy may be attributed to that, although levels of homophobic bullying apparently remain high.

However, Explore feels that such progress has been achieved at the cost of brutalising these subjects, and politicising them. Pupils should be taught good behaviour of all these kinds not (just) because it's the law, or that benefits may be cut, but because it's right. Eventually, there should be a resumption of meaning to the word respect, and the development of appreciation for the ideals and practice of love, tenderness, care and concern.

The Department of Education appears to have lost the ability to use such language in its policy documents. In turn, schools are not set up to examine and discuss matters of values vis a vis uncertainty, and human duties vis a vis their frailties. These limitations should be recognised. Although government is well-placed to recognise the requirement - and this Education Committee inquiry is proof of that - there is no evidence that government itself can provide the solution.

The provision of relationship education in schools is poor, and informal explanations made by schools include lack of time, lack of teaching materials, and lack of teachers wishing to become involved in the matter. Altogether the failure is systemic.

Explore's belief is that relationships must be learned, not taught; from people with experiences to share: and the matter is unlikely to be improved by government fiat.

**Whether recent Government steps to supplement the guidance on teaching about sex and relationships, including consent, abuse between teenagers and cyber-bullying, are adequate.*

Response: Yes and no: As indicated above, **yes** the existing Government steps are all that is necessary, but **no** they're not good enough to prove sufficient for schools to comply. What is needed is not more guidance but more implementation.

The government should remind schools to cater in the main for the majority case of heterosexual love and marriage: minority interests being treated proportionately

Schools also need reminding to put forward the positive aspects of relationships, including love, trust, caring and companionship: the negative matters of violence infidelity and separation being put in context.

One way forward is to promote concrete steps for schools to take. Explore submits its own service as a worthwhile such step, available immediately.

**How the effectiveness of SRE should be measured*

Response: Quantitative micromanagement is inappropriate. This is a matter of local and cultural importance that should best be governed at the school level.

The Department should apply more firmly its existing guidance, and require evidence each year that a school has its own SRE policy that is (i) in place, (ii) involving parents, and (iii) in action. Ofsted should give a priority to confirming these measures are in place.

The industry should be encouraged to provide and publicise examples of good practice so as to galvanise schools to perform well on this count. It's a community matter, and local clubs and the press should be engaged and involved. Again, Ofsted could highlight as good practice the example of Explore: which can be made available to secondary schools everywhere.

*There were 400 submissions
Explore was one of only 25 who were
asked to go back to give ORAL EVIDENCE*