

ASTI Submission

NCCA Consultation on Relationships and Sexuality Education, January 2019

1. Introduction

The ASTI welcomed the decision of the Minister for Education and Skills to review the Relationship and Sexuality – RSE – in schools with reference to content of the RSE curriculum and support materials, and its delivery of the curriculum to students. Since its introduction almost twenty-five years ago, much has changed in Irish society and the curriculum needs to be updated with reference to:

- Consent, what it means and its importance
- Developments in contraception and reproductive health
- Healthy, positive sexual expression and relationships
- Social media and its effects on self and social relationships
- LGBTQ+ - diverse genders and sexualities
- Pornography

Student wellbeing is increasingly to the forefront in education policy as our society responds to exponential social changes. Relationships and sexuality are intrinsic to human wellbeing and are of profound developmental importance to adolescents. Unlike previous generations, today's adolescents are making the transition from childhood to young adulthood in a culture which is always 'online' (1) and which is characterised by the pervasive sexualisation and commercialisation of young people – as was highlighted in the similarly-titled 2015 study by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. (2)

The ASTI believes that every student has a right to quality RSE irrespective of school ethos. At the heart of every educational project is the concept of respect for the learner, their agency and their needs. Young people need the information, skills and values to understand and enjoy their sexuality, to have safe and fulfilling relationships and to take responsibility for their own and others' sexual health, safety and well-being. It should be of deep concern to policy-makers that research demonstrates that young people get most of their information on sexuality from the internet, including online pornography. (3) This reality of the lack of adequate education on sexualities and genders in schools is underlined in the 2017 consultation on the LBGT+ national youth strategy. (4) It is incumbent on the education partners to develop a new RSE programme which is firmly focused on the best interests of the young person, is comprehensive in its content and available in every school to every student in each year of their second-level education.

2. What is the current situation?

Relationships and Sexuality Education – RSE – was introduced in schools as part of a package of measures in the wake of the Report of the Kilkenny Incest Case (1993). RSE is part of the broader Social Personal and Health Education – SPHE – which became a compulsory programme at junior cycle in 2003. While a draft curriculum framework for SPHE for senior cycle was developed in 2005, to date there is no requirement on schools to provide the SPHE programme at this level though they are required to provide RSE. The aims of the RESE programme are:

- to help young people understand and develop friendships and relationships
- to promote an understanding of sexuality
- to promote a positive attitude to one's own sexuality and in one's relationships with others
- to promote knowledge of and respect for reproduction
- to enable young people to develop attitudes and values towards their sexuality in a moral, spiritual and social framework.

It should be noted that while these aims remain educationally valid, they are limited in terms of areas of knowledge, skills and competences addressed and are, moreover, primarily structured as a curricular intervention rather than as a learning process spread over the duration of the student's time in second-level education. This 'add-on status' is confirmed by the one-class period per week – 40-minutes - time period recommended for RSE. In addition to SPHE, since the 1990s, second-level schools are required to implement the *"Schools for Health in Ireland: Framework for Developing a Health Promoting School"*. The latter framework was subsequently incorporated into the 2013 Guidelines for Youth Mental Health – *"Wellbeing in Post-Primary Schools"*. The Wellbeing programme in the Framework for Junior Cycle supplements these whole-school approaches.

In summary, there is no dearth of guidance or policy frameworks for schools to support the holistic wellbeing of young people, including relationships and sexuality. However, as several Departmental and other evaluations have consistently demonstrated, students' access to quality RSE in post-primary is variable both across schools and within schools. (5) The background Research Paper prepared for the consultation confirms these findings. (6) In this submission, the ASTI will not reiterate these findings but, rather, will highlight some of the key concerns it has as regards the content and delivery of the current RSE programme.

3. Issues of concern to the ASTI

3.1 Students have a right to comprehensive and holistic relationships and sexuality education

Education and curriculum policy is broadly focused on enabling the holistic growth of the child. Curriculum policy across the spectrum from early childhood to primary to second-level education is focused on empowering the child by developing his or her skills, learning and other capacities, human dignity, self-esteem and self-confidence. Relationship and sexuality education is, by definition, integral to the achievement of this societal goal. However, as several national and international experts have highlighted, the manner in which relationship and sexuality education is provided is significantly influenced by the school ethos. (7) As recently as 2010, the Department of Education and Skills advised schools of their obligation to provide an RSE programme that is objective, based on contemporary scientific evidence and does not involve censoring, withholding or intentionally misrepresenting information, for example as regards contraception or different means of maintaining sexual and reproductive health. (8) The ASTI does not accept that the ethos of the school, religious or otherwise, should determine the manner in which the RSE programme is provided to students. Students have the right to objective and factual relationships and sexuality education regardless of the type of school which they attend.

Recommendation 1: School ethos should not serve as a barrier to the objective and factual delivery of the relationships and sexuality programme in second-level schools.

3.2 The curricular context for RSE programme

The current curricular context for the RSE programme is fragmented and as such, contributes to inconsistencies in students' learning experiences. While the RSE programme at junior cycle complements the Social Personal and Health Education short course within the Wellbeing programme, neither the 2015 Framework for Junior Cycle or the Wellbeing Guidelines provide a clear articulation of rationale and purpose of RSE as set out, for example, in Chapter 3 of the Research Report. The situation at senior cycle is even more inconsistent in that RSE is a stand-alone programme to be timetabled for six hours per annum. Curriculum is a complex concept and process. At its most general level, it refers to the totality of students' learning experiences in school, including the stated purposes of education and how it is to be delivered. Drawing on this definition, it is clear that RSE is very much an "added-on" course which is 'fitted into' the school timetable – as was evidenced in the 2013 Inspectorate report. There is a need for a clear and coherent statement of the purposes and contexts as, for example, set out in the 2010 World Health Organisation's *Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe* (9) and in the 2018 UNESCO *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education: An Evidence-Informed Approach*. (10)

Recommendation 2: NCCA to develop a curriculum statement for RSE for both junior and senior cycle which provides the rationale, purposes and goals for RSE in line with the holistic sexuality education approach endorsed by UNESCO.

3. 3 Teacher professionalism

Deployment of teachers to teach RSE: All of the research on the implementation of the RSE programme identifies several problematic aspects in relation to the deployment and training of teachers. As regards deployment, the most common problem is that several teachers can be allocated RSE classes largely because of so-called ‘gaps’ in their timetables, confirming the ‘add-on’ status of RSE in the school curriculum. A more fundamental problem is the lack of opportunity for teachers to engage in RSE training. The latter arises not just because of lack of substitution for release of such teachers but also because of teachers’ workload. Working an average of 40-hours each week, teachers are finding it increasingly difficult to participate in professional learning activities. (11)

Another aspect of teacher deployment is that frequently the most recently qualified teachers, who do not have full-time contracts, are allocated to teach the programmes. Principals resort to this measure in a genuine desire to “bump up” the young teachers’ hours so that they have not only more experience of classroom teaching but also to improve their salary. This is not an optimum situation. Arguably, the most suitable teachers to teach SPHE and RSE are those who are familiar with the school, its culture and its students and, of great significance, are sufficiently experienced in the facilitative methodologies which are the best way to promote learning in these areas. Foundational texts in education emphasise the role of the teacher to facilitate the transition of the student into an active learner in order to cultivate new knowledge. (12) This deep pedagogical expertise is particularly pertinent in the area of relationships and sexuality education.

Lack of access to RSE education/training: Lack of access to training has been identified in every evaluation as having a detrimental impact on the implementation of the RSE programme and on the quality of students’ experience of the programme. The nature of training also needs to be completely re-examined. Teachers need to be able to access a range of learning activities in RSE in order to develop an adequate knowledge base and skills. The inservice model of one or two days out of school should be considered as a basic introduction to teaching RSE. Given the complex ethical, philosophical and sociological complexities of the subject matter of RSE, - such as consent, pornography, social media and gender identity – there needs to be a sustained programme of continuing professional development at Level 7 and upwards for teachers. Teachers should be seconded or released from school to engage in such training. All such training should be accredited.

Current Departmental Guidelines underline that all teachers are responsible for RSE. However, initial teacher education does not provide a foundation course in this area. This is a matter of concern because exposure to health education, including RSE, is critical to ensure that all newly qualified teachers have a strong understanding of their professional role. A study by UL Education Department academics in 2012 found that over three-quarters of final year students surveyed stated that they do not intend to teach SPHE or RSE. (13)

Teacher autonomy: A foundational aspect of teacher professionalism is their knowledge base which, allied with their autonomy, sustains their classroom practice. Teachers' knowledge base is subject specific and that is why many teachers are uncomfortable teaching RSE: they simply feel that they do not have the knowledge base to ensure quality learning in this deeply complex area. At the same time, the research evidence shows that, by virtue of their pedagogical expertise and pre-existing relationships with students, the most effective RSE educators are teachers. This research evidence underlines the need for a radical rethink of how to train more teachers to teach RSE.

Recommendation 3: *The Department of Education and Skills, in conjunction with the Teaching Council, develop a programme for adequate and appropriate continuing professional development in RSE. Teachers should be facilitated to engage with this programme by measures such as substitution, secondment, financial assistance/no fees, accreditation and remuneration.*

3. 4 School leadership

Wellbeing and related programmes such as RSE require strong collaborative school practices to be effectively integrated into the curriculum, student support structures and the overall culture of the school. Such practices can only be sustained by adequate leadership structures in schools. Circular 03/18 states that high quality leadership is crucial in establishing a shared purpose and vision for a school and to the achievement of high quality educational outcomes for students. Whole-school curriculum planning is totally dependent on effective in-school management. Successive ASTI Millward Brown and Red C surveys have demonstrated that the moratorium has negatively impacted on this vital area of school, as well as significantly increasing the workload of individual teachers. The national and international evidence is unequivocal on the importance of whole-school approaches for viable and sustainable SPHE and RSE implementation.

Recommendation 4: *The number of school leadership posts should be increased to ensure that every school has a dedicated co-ordinator for the revised RSE programme.*

3.5 Group size must facilitate confidentiality, privacy and a safe environment for students

Class size has a significant impact on the delivery of RSE-type programmes. (UNESCO, 2018: 96) Given that sexuality is a subject that can arouse strong emotions, reactions and feelings of anxiety, embarrassment and vulnerability, among others, it is important for students to have a confidential, private and safe environment to share their questions, learn and participate without feeling embarrassed or vulnerable. A sense of trust, confidentiality and a safe environment can only be achieved by ensuring small groups. It is simply not possible to do this in the traditional class size of 28-30 students. The most effective methodologies for teaching RSE happen in small groups. (14) Research has shown that small group interventions in general can be an effective means of preventing many kinds of risk behaviours among adolescents. (15) Small group teaching opens up pedagogic spaces that are versatile, dynamic and responsive. It affords the opportunity to develop the skills of sensitive listening and watchful attentiveness to those who are perhaps less able to join in. The larger the group, the more complicated the dynamics and the likelihood that some remain silent. (16)

This is particularly important in the context of the inclusive model of education focused on diversity of needs. Class sizes at second-level are high by international standards (17). Teachers are already reporting that large classes are inhibiting classroom practice of both teachers and students in the new junior cycle specifications. Class size has a particularly significant impact on the delivery of RSE-type programmes and allowance in the allocation of teachers need to be increased specifically to implement an effective RSE programme in schools. In conclusion, small groups offers students the opportunity to ask questions and make comments that are not normally accommodated by large group teaching contexts.

Recommendation 5: The pupil: teacher ratio must be reduced to ensure that class size / group size in second level schools RSE/SPHE classes are in line with international recommendations, namely, 12-16 students per group, in order to implement an effective RSE programme in the context of SPHE

Conclusion

The ASTI would caution against adopting an alarmist approach to the state of RSE education in our schools in light of current and international issues in relation to sexual violence, consent and online culture. Schools are complying with Departmental requirements to a broadly satisfactory level. However, there is a need to review the range of issues included in the RSE programme. There is also a need to address the implementation challenges which schools face in providing quality RSE programmes to all students. The latter include teacher education, class size and school leadership. Critically, current policy and legislation needs to be reviewed so that all schools, irrespective of their denominational or other status, meet their obligations to provide comprehensive, non-judgemental RSE education to all students.

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