

ASTI Submission to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills

Relationships and Sexuality Education, March 2018

1. Introduction

The ASTI welcomes this opportunity to engage in dialogue with the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills on the crucial issue of student wellbeing, especially as regards the development of healthy and respectful sexual behaviours. Student wellbeing is increasingly to the forefront in education policy as our society responds to deeply concerning issues such as high youth suicide rates; the impact of the ‘always online’ culture on our children’s lives; and the pervasive sexualisation and commercialisation of young people – as highlighted in the similarly-titled 2015 study by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. (1) It is also of note that, in their final report, your colleagues on the Joint Oireachtas Committee on the 8th Amendment endorsed the Recommendation of the Citizens’ Assembly that *“improvements be made in sexual health and relationship education, including the areas of contraception and consent, in primary and post-primary schools”*. Wellbeing is now a central programme in the new Junior Cycle curriculum while the imminent review of senior cycle education will also invariably address this area of student learning. It would be short-sighted therefore to attribute the Minister’s request for a major update to the RSE programme solely as a reaction to the recent high profile court case in Northern Ireland.

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

The recommended time period is one-class period, or 40-minutes, per week. Professional support for both RSE and SPHE is provided through the PDST. The RSE guidelines state that the values inherent in the programme should be consistent with the core values and ethos of the school. 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”*.

In summary, there is no dearth of guidance or policy on how schools can support the holistic wellbeing of young people, including the provision of guidance and support on 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. (2)

3. Students' access to quality RSE

The 2013 Departmental Inspectorate report is the most recent evaluation of SPHE and RSE in schools. It provides evidence of good practice and of areas where practice can be improved. Key findings include:

- most schools had good policies and whole-school supports in place for junior cycle but less so for senior cycle
- deployment of staff to teach SPHE is good in most schools: however, need for more effective deployment of staff for RSE at senior cycle
- planning for SPHE generally good at junior cycle but less so at senior cycle
- teachers' expertise in facilitative methodologies to support experiential learning was good in majority of schools: however, there was room for improvement in 20% of schools
- assessment of student learning in SPHE/RSE requires more consideration

The Inspectorate's report confirms some trends in previous research on the implementation of RSE, namely, an over-crowded curriculum; gender issues - single-sex boys' schools having lower levels of implementation and low male teacher participation in RSE inservice training; deployment of teachers to teach RSE classes without consultation or having completed the necessary inservice training.

ESRI research confirms that students want schools to provide RSE: moreover, schools are considered a 'neutral' zone where they could explore issues relating to relationships and sexuality, underlining the importance of teachers' expertise in facilitative methodologies. (3)

4. Quality RSE for all students: ASTI concerns

Societal changes requires that the RSE and SPHE programme are of the highest quality in our schools. Evaluations to date have indicated that, broadly speaking, schools already have put in place good policies and practices. What is clear is that that senior cycle students are not as well served as junior cycle students. This deficiency needs to be addressed in the review of senior cycle.

There is also need for more qualitative research on the experience of students of RSE in different school types. The 2013 Inspectorate report did not differentiate between school type or examine the impact of school ethos on the nature and range of the RSE programme. There is some anecdotal evidence that some denominational school have a circumscribed curriculum wherein some aspects of sexuality, especially in relation to LBGTI+ sexual identities and crisis pregnancy, are not addressed. However, anecdotal evidence is just that: we need more qualitative research on what is actually happening in schools today in order to ensure that policy is based on evidence so that all students, irrespective of their school type, are provided with comprehensive, non-judgemental learning experiences.

The ASTI believes that the following systemic issues are negatively impacting on the implementation of RSE and SPHE in schools:

- Promotional posts: The number of teachers holding promotional posts is at its lowest in decades: **?% compared to ?% in ?**. Whole-school curriculum planning is totally dependent on effective in-school management. Successive ASTI MillwardBrown 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.
- Teacher workload has now become a major source of dissatisfaction across the profession and is negatively impacting on teachers' wellbeing. The Wellbeing Guidelines for the Junior Cycle have underlined the importance of teacher wellbeing: *Wellbeing in school starts with the staff. They are in the front line of the work and it is hard for them to be genuinely motivated to promote emotional and social wellbeing of others if they feel uncared for and burnt out themselves. (NCCA, Wellbeing Guidelines, p. 29)*
- The DES Circulars and Guidelines on RSE 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 are 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. (4)
- Notwithstanding the findings in the 2013 Inspectorate report on the general effective deployment of teachers to teach SPHE and RSE, there is strong anecdotal evidence that, in the majority of cases, principals chose teachers to teach the programmes rather than teachers volunteering for same. The latter underlines the point above re better preparation for teaching health education in initial teacher education.
- Another aspect of teacher deployment to teach SPHE and RSE 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.
- Some teachers are reluctant to teach SPHE or RSE. This is sometimes the result of a genuine belief that they are an expert in their own subject area and therefore are not comfortable to teach an area in which they do not have expertise. This underlines the need for consistent, high quality CPD for teachers across their career.

5. 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. A debate is also required on ensuring that all schools, irrespective of their

denominational or other status, meet their obligations to provide comprehensive, non-judgemental RSE education to students.

1. Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2015) *The Sexualisation and Commercialisation of Children in Ireland: An Exploratory Study*

2. Department of Education and Skills (2013) *Looking at Social, Personal and Health Education* (Report of Inspectorate)

Department of Education and Science (2007) *RSE in the Context of SPHE: An Assessment of the Challenges to Full Implementation of the Programme in Post-primary Schools*

3. ESRI (2006) *Pathways through the Junior Cycle: The Experiences of Second-Year Students*

4. Mannix Mc Namara et al. (2012) *Pre-service teachers' experience of, and attitudes towards to, teaching SPHE in Ireland*, in *Health Education*, Vol. 112, No. 3