



**INTO Submission to Joint Oireachtas Committee  
on Education and Skills**

20 April 2018

**Relationships and Sexuality Education**

## **Introduction**

The INTO notes the recent announcement by the Minister for Education and Skills, Richard Bruton TD, to conduct a major review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in schools. The Minister stated that the review would cover both the content of the RSE curriculum and support materials, as well as the teaching of the curriculum to students. While the INTO welcomes a commitment to review RSE, any reconsideration must be within the context of wider primary redevelopments which are currently underway by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA]. The INTO reiterates that there is an escalating workload issue in schools and any change or development must be mediated at a reasonable pace and within an agreed timeline to ensure effective implementation. Primary teachers are already balancing the demands of significant curriculum change in languages and mathematics. The INTO is of the view that curriculum change should be carried out in a pre-planned, strategic and developmental way within the context of the overall curriculum rather than a haphazard approach which involves a knee jerk reaction to every emerging issue in society.

## **Background**

The INTO has been to the fore in seeking the inclusion of social, personal and health education in primary schools, including education regarding relationships and sexuality. The INTO was very much behind the Stay Safe, the Child Abuse Prevention Programme and the introduction of RSE in the late 1990s. Relationship and sexuality education has been an integral part of the primary school curriculum for many decades. Following ongoing debate since 1986 in relation to the introduction of sex education in schools, an interim RSE programme was issued to schools in 1996 (Circular 2/95). In the revised primary curriculum, RSE became part of the wider Social, Personal and Health Education [SPHE] subject. The current RSE programme can be viewed in the context of the Education Act as it aims to provide opportunities for children and young people to learn about relationships and sexuality in ways that help them think and act in a moral, caring and responsible way.

An INTO survey conducted in 2005 showed that there is, in general, a favourable response from teachers to the teaching of SPHE. While there was overwhelming support for the introduction of RSE to schools from parents (93%), there was some initial trepidation on the part of teachers in taking on the role of teaching children about sensitive and personal matters. Some 73% of teachers surveyed felt uncomfortable teaching children about sexuality. However, it was noted that good in-service increased confidence levels significantly (INTO, 2006).

In the second phase of its review of the Primary School Curriculum (1999), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment examined teachers' perceptions of SPHE among other subjects (NCCA, 2008). In SPHE, the sensitivity of the content of RSE and teachers' own discomfort with teaching this content to young children was identified as a key challenge to curriculum implementation. RSE was considered of particular importance in the senior classes for children dealing with the challenges of adjusting to adolescence. Teachers said they were challenged by the sensitivity of some of the material, the difficulty in teaching some of the RSE content, and teachers' own discomfort or lack of training. The review also highlighted the demands of covering such a broad programme and of getting responses from reluctant

speaker[s]. Many teachers questioned their own preparation for teaching sensitive issues, particularly with older children.

### **Workload**

SPHE, and particularly RSE, can have a positive influence on the holistic development of children. SPHE is a very broad curriculum which promotes personal development and well-being for the child, providing children with skills for life. SPHE, however, must not be seen as a cure-all for society's ills. SPHE cannot always be seen as a curricular response to address all issues of concern to society. There is no doubt that schools have a very important role to play, but schools do not operate in isolation from broader society. Children are very much influenced by values and practices that prevail in their home environment and in the broader community. Schools are not the solution – only part of the solution.

Given the broad and encompassing nature of SPHE, teachers have cited a particular issue with this subject and curriculum overload (INTO, 2006; NCCA, 2008). Any review of the RSE programme should be considered in the context of the current workload in schools. An additional challenge associated with RSE is the time required to obtain parental request. The INTO survey concurred that the greatest obstacle to teaching SPHE was time, followed in order by, lack of resources, overcrowded curriculum, multi-grade classes, class size, lack of parental support, lack of CPD, broadness of subject, children not being serious, lack of focus among teachers, suitable content and lack of knowledge (INTO, 2006). Any review should acknowledge and seek to address these barriers in order to ensure effective implementation.

### **School Ethos**

As RSE has a moral, ethical and spiritual dimension, its development is influenced by the ethos and culture of individual schools. The school culture and environment provides approaches and a variety of learning experiences that help children to understand themselves, to tolerate others and to establish and maintain healthy patterns of behaviour. Ongoing influences in the child's life such as family, religious, societal and moral beliefs impact on schools in the formulation, development and implementation of SPHE policies, curriculum and programmes.

In this context, the INTO notes that the *Joint Oireachtas Committee on the 8th Amendment* recommended that RSE '*information should be provided in an impartial and factual manner that is independent of school ethos*'. The current programme states that '*the School RSE Policy will have been developed in each individual school... school policy will reflect the core values and ethos of the school*' (DES, 1998, p.7). Consequently, many schools have policies on RSE which reflect the ethos of the school and the values in the policy are often consistent with the overall characteristic spirit of the school. The relationship between school ethos and the State curriculum, will need to be addressed as part of the overall review of the Primary School Curriculum 1999, and particularly in the review of SPHE and RSE. Children should have a right to age-appropriate factual information and content, and to inclusive and age-appropriate pedagogies relating to relationship and sexuality education. Parents may also have an expectation that the school's ethos will be reflected in their children's learning. Teachers need clarity around any potential conflict that may arise in regard to the RSE curriculum, SPHE in general and school ethos.

## **Professional Development (CPD)**

In light of the sensitive and sometimes challenging nature of RSE, full and proper provision for CPD is essential to support teachers to feel confident and competent in teaching RSE. Heretofore, substitutable professional development for teachers in the broad area of SPHE, and more specifically in RSE, has been limited. During the implementation of the *Primary School Curriculum*, the Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP) provided all primary teachers with two days in-service in relation to the SPHE Curriculum throughout the 2002-2003 school year. A specific planning day for SPHE was not provided and schools were expected to incorporate planning for SPHE in to their other planning activities in the school.

The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) informed the INTO on a variety of more recent professional development programmes available to teachers to support RSE. The PDST are currently offering experiential and practical RSE Twin Workshops to teachers on teaching methodologies together with in-school support. The INTO believes that it is regrettable that substitution is not available for this particular workshop. Furthermore, in light of the importance of RSE, the INTO is concerned that the CPD will not reach all teachers in a systematic way. Teachers have reported that the quality of CPD in SPHE provided by the PDST has been of a high quality and has had a positive impact of teaching the subject (INTO, 2005). In that regard, the INTO recommended that the DES adequately resource the PDST to ensure that the provision of CPD is on a system-wide basis and accompanied by substitution. If the government are committed to a quality review of any aspect of the curriculum it must be accompanied with proper provision of CPD to ensure effective implementation.

## **External Agencies**

In the 2005 INTO survey, 96% of teachers considered SPHE to be an important subject in the curriculum. Nevertheless, RSE continues to be one of the aspects of SPHE where some schools invite an outside person to speak to pupils and in some cases parents as well. According to the INTO survey it is quite usual to invite outside people to deliver aspects of the curriculum including RSE. Teachers are considered to be the most appropriate person to teach all aspects of the curriculum as they have established relationships with the children, they know what stage the students are at, they know the sensitivities at any given time, and they know the maturity level of the class. RSE has unique challenges and requirements and different school contexts demand different approaches to RSE. The INTO is of the view that both class teachers and principal teachers are best placed to use their professional judgement to determine whether an external body is required to work with students on any aspect of the RSE programme. The use of external bodies should be in line with school policy.

## **Parental support**

Parental support is critical to the success of any curricular area, particularly RSE. Parents are the primary educators of their children and they provide the moral, cultural and familial values for young children. Since parents have the primary role in the social, personal and health education of their children, schools often provide them with opportunities to contribute to the development and implementation of SPHE in the school. Parents also provide complementary and supportive assistance to teachers teaching RSE by attending RSE workshops in the school and by reinforcing the content of the RSE programme at home and in family life. The

involvement of parents, health professionals and relevant community members in planning, reviewing and supporting schools' SPHE plans is crucial to its success. This partnership approach helps to provide children with a consistent experience in SPHE enabling them to make connections between their lives at home, in the school and in the community. On occasion parents prefer an outside agency rather than the class teacher to deal with RSE given their unique and important relationship with the child.

Teachers find it difficult to implement or progress initiatives or programmes without adequate parental support. The INTO notes that the current RSE programme states that 'the school policy will include provision for the rights of those who wish to withdraw their children from RSE' (DES, 1998, p. 9). The INTO respects that parents have the right to withdraw their children from any aspect of the curriculum, however, withdrawing pupils can create significant challenges for teachers at local level. Therefore, the INTO recommends that the DES puts proper provision in place for schools to facilitate those parents who chose to absent their child from RSE.

### **SPHE Programmes**

In general, the majority of teachers have found the structured programmes useful as a means of supporting the teaching of SPHE (INTO, 2006). The current RSE programme is non-prescriptive, rather it provide a menu of options for classroom lessons from which teachers can choose in accordance with their school policy on RSE. It is important that teachers and schools retain the autonomy to use their professional judgement to determine the most appropriate approach. Teachers are best placed to satisfy themselves that the content of materials which they use is appropriate to the needs of students and in line with their school RSE Policy and Programme.

The current curriculum supports '*Resource Materials for Relationships and Sexuality Education*' while originally relevant and useful needs to be updated to reflect developments since the 1990s. A new programme for RSE should endeavour to cover present-day issues such as the influence of social media and LGBTQ+ matters. For example, LGBT young people and children from families with same-sex parents often experience homophobic and transphobic bullying and prejudice in their schools and communities. Addressing different families through age-appropriate discussions and activities can help promote a more respectful environment. '*Different Families Same Love*' was created by the INTO in response to requests from teachers for educational resources following publication of the Anti-Bullying Guidelines for Primary and Post-Primary Schools by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in 2013 and it was launched by the Minister of Education in 2015. It is now recommended as an additional resource to teach SPHE and RSE by PDST, and it is mentioned in the new Stay Safe programme that was updated in 2016. This valuable resource should be considered within the context of any RSE review as it includes good practice guidelines for inclusive schools, advice on class-appropriate use of language, and lesson ideas for all classes in primary school in line with SPHE curriculum objectives.

## **Conclusion**

The research carried out by the INTO in 2005 and the NCCA's curriculum review of SPHE are now over ten years old. Any revision of the current RSE or SPHE curriculum should be supported by further research to explore current experiences and practices in schools. The NCCA review of SPHE found that respondents prioritised the need to develop suitable resources for SPHE, especially in Gaeilge. Curriculum for RSE should continue to be developmental in nature and age appropriate in content and methodologies. A revised RSE curriculum also need to be accompanied by modern, up-to-date, and attractive resources and materials that are appropriate for primary schools in Ireland. Materials and resources also need to be available in Irish, at the same time as materials in English become available. Complementary programmes should also be developed to support parents and parent associations to support the teaching of RSE and SPHE in school.

## **References**

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