

TRC Response to the Education Committee October 2024

TRC Overview

1. The Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) (formed in 1943) represents the Church of Ireland, Presbyterian Church in Ireland, and Methodist Church in Ireland in all matters of education in Northern Ireland.
2. The TRC is recognised by the Department of Education as the body representing the transferor Churches with regard to education, and in particular school governance. The Transferor Churches work together at policy level through TRC in a number of ways including support for transferor governors, monitoring developments in legislation and policy, and contributing to policy development
3. In return for transferring their school buildings, staff and pupils into state control the Transferor Churches are awarded statutory rights of representation on the boards of governors of schools within the 'controlled schools' sector through Schedule 4 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. The statutory rights accorded to the Transferor Churches and the consequent responsibilities placed upon the state combine to ensure the continued existence of a non-denominational Christian ethos within controlled schools. Transferor governors have a particular responsibility in upholding this ethos. There are currently 552 controlled schools in Northern Ireland representing 49% of all schools.

Introduction

4. As an organisation committed to all schools, their governors, teachers, and pupils, the TRC is committed to supporting the delivery of excellent RSE, by respecting the needs of young people, and providing them with the opportunity to explore their own personal morals, values and beliefs.
5. TRC believes RSE should be taught in a **sensitive and inclusive manner**, reinforced and supported by policies and processes that schools have in place around bullying, safeguarding and pastoral care. Young people should also have the opportunity to explore their own personal morals, values and beliefs including

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the moral and ethical considerations around sensitive issues like abortion and the prevention of early pregnancy.

6. Recent legislation has stated that teaching should be in a way that does not advocate or promote any particular opinion. It is unclear to us how RSE can be taught in a way which does not spend time acknowledging and articulating the moral and ethical considerations involved. Excellent RSE which equips and informs young people, allowing them to come to an understanding of healthy and flourishing relationships, must surely be more than the presentation of legal, biological or medical information. RSE cannot be taught in a vacuum and the ethos of the school must be taken into account when delivering RSE.

Areas of Focus for Mini-Inquiry into Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)

Curriculum Integration and Content

Evaluate how RSE integrates across different stages of the NI Curriculum, including key areas like Personal Development and Mutual Understanding at primary level, and Learning for Life and Work at secondary level.

Assess the effectiveness of the statutory content and additional flexible content tailored by schools to meet specific community or pupil needs.

7. Every approach to RSE should begin from the premise that it should be taught to the highest quality, and that children and young people should be encouraged to develop themselves as critical thinkers, considering a range of moral and ethical viewpoints. Whilst the high-quality teaching across all our schools is deeply appreciated, it is a fallacy to suggest that any aspect of education, including on these most sensitive of topics, can be presented in a morally neutral or value-free environment.

It is clear that every approach to RSE is shaped by a particular worldview, within which are explicit and implicit judgements about the meaning and purpose of relationships and sexuality.

8. We contend that no element of RSE can be presented in a way which does not involve moral or ethical considerations as there is no 'neutral' worldview or understanding of human identity and relationship.

Consequently, it is simply not possible to discuss or teach this content in class without consideration of the moral and ethical values involved. These matters concern the whole person and should not be taught just as biology but as relating to the whole person and affecting them physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

Lessons should therefore be delivered within a safe space wherein all pupils feel valued and able to express their personal viewpoints and opinions, without fear of consequences.

9. TRC believes that the professionalism of teachers should be trusted in designing a flexible curriculum that is tailored and responsive to the needs of the children and young people whom they already know, and the arrangements currently in place provide for this approach- the exception being the content mandated by the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Policy Implementation and School Compliance

Review the implementation and updating of school-based RSE policies, particularly in light of new subordinate legislation on topics such as early pregnancy prevention and access to abortion.

Investigate the extent of parental and pupil consultation in developing these RSE policies.

10. In line with current guidance, every school should have in place its own policy on how it will address the delivery of RSE. Schools should indicate, at least annually, to parents where and how this policy can be accessed.

The policy should be developed under the leadership of governors, in collaboration with parents or carers and pupils, as well as teachers and other educational and health professionals. Included within the policy will be the aims and objectives of RSE and how teaching will support the school's ethos and reflect the moral and religious principles held by parents/carers and school management authorities. The planned RSE programme should also be made available to pupils and parents/carers.

11. Cognisance should be taken regarding issues which may result in trauma or mental health issues which may not be covered under existing policies. Policies on RSE should be regularly reviewed and updated by the Board of Governors to

keep pace with the changes and developments in the areas of RSE, particularly those relating to social media and the influence of the media on the lives and opinions of our young people.

12. When any major changes to the school's policy are proposed, we believe that all members of the school community, including parents and pupils, should be consulted and their views considered. Support should always be available for pupils for whom these topics 'trigger' a safeguarding/child protection or trauma memory. It should not be assumed that this is covered under existing policies.
13. Lessons should be developed in such a way as to encourage critical thinking, enabling pupils to consider a range of ethical and moral viewpoints, including a religious view which reflects the ethos of the school. There should be balance in the ethical and religious viewpoints articulated. Class discussions should be respectful, balanced and open spaces where all pupils feel valued and safe to express their personal viewpoint and opinions, without fear of consequences, and teachers should not be forced to teach things with which they ethically and morally disagree.

Resources and Support for RSE

Analyse the availability and utilisation of the RSE Hub and other CCEA resources intended to support RSE delivery.

Consider the impact of external resources like those provided by the Catholic Schools' Trustee Service and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools on the uniformity of RSE content.

14. TRC acknowledges that improvements need to be made in the teaching and delivery of RSE, but that imposing material is not a positive way forward. TRC believes in consultation and accurate information to inform discussion and develop high quality RSE.
15. TRC, along with many other stakeholders, has been involved in detailed discussions with CCEA about the development of resources for teachers who have responsibility for delivering RSE in post-primary schools. Even if one were to take at face value the claim in the 2018 CEDAW Report that RSE is underdeveloped and non-existent, a cursory glance at the CCEA RSE Hub would

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give some indication as to how that can no longer be judged to be the case. TRC would acknowledge the significant work undertaken by CCEA in the development of the RSE hub, and the collaborative and consultative way in which they went about this work, which could serve as a model for dealing with complex and sensitive issues amongst a group of diverse stakeholders.

16. That the very creation of resources carries with it the reality that those creating them make value judgements on which facts and what science is presented, and what is understood by 'age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate'.
17. The teaching and learning resources developed by CCEA should therefore particularly present moral and ethical issues that arise when it comes to sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion.
18. Resources should be open to scrutiny and should ensure that they acknowledge differences in worldview positions e.g. the Christian belief in the sanctity of life from conception.
19. The resources should not presume that young people are or will be sexually active and should affirm that saying no to sexual activity is a possible and positive choice. This is in line with current government policies around sexual health and health promotion. Resources should also present the reason or reasons why someone would wait until they are married before engaging in a sexual relationship.
20. We will continue to support the RSE Hub in the development and production of resources, as well as support CPD training for teachers on the delivery of this content as part of our commitment to partnership with schools in our local communities.

Teacher Training and External Providers

Examine the adequacy of professional training and development for teachers tasked with delivering RSE, focusing on their preparation to handle sensitive aspects of the curriculum.

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Assess the role and quality of external providers in RSE delivery, including their alignment with scientific accuracy and educational standards.

21. TRC supports our Initial Teacher Education providers in their work to ensure that all new teachers are equipped to deliver RSE with maturity and wisdom. TRC believe it is vital that a fully funded support programme of regular Professional Development for all teachers who delivery RSE is provided.
22. External providers should be obliged to inform a school of the topics that will be covered in the content of their lesson, including the learning outcomes, and this information must be passed on to parents.
23. A teacher should always be present when an external provider is delivering content to ensure that what is delivered is in line with what was agreed and corresponds with the aims, values, ethos, moral and ethical framework of the school. This also provides an opportunity for the teacher to follow up with a class or individual pupils on any specifics issues of concern which might arise. Should a parent/carer have questions or wish to provide feedback on the delivery of a session by an external provider, the teacher will have observed the lesson and therefore be best placed to deal with this.
24. Relevant information should be made available to parents, pupils, staff and governors about external organisations coming into schools to deliver RSE, so that they are able, if they so wish, to find out more details about the ethos and values of the organisation, and what material will be covered in the class.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Evaluate the mechanisms for monitoring the implementation and effectiveness of RSE, particularly the role of the Education Training Inspectorate (ETI) and any changes needed in light of recent educational reforms.

25. TRC welcome the most recent ETI report into the delivery of RSE. TRC hopes that due to the end of action short of strike that RSE can be inspected more thoroughly, and all schools can demonstrate their commitment to the delivery of excellent RSE, which respects the needs of young people, and provides them with the opportunity to explore their own personal morals, values and beliefs.

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Stakeholder Engagement and Inclusivity

Review how effectively the RSE curriculum engages diverse student populations and respects the rights and beliefs of different communities, including considerations of inclusivity and scientific accuracy.

Assess the impact of school ethos on the impartiality and comprehensiveness of RSE delivery.

26. TRC believes that education on relationships and sexuality begins in the home and is the primary responsibility of the parents/carers not the sole responsibility of teachers and schools. We also recognise that parents/carers have the right to have their children educated in accordance with their wishes.
27. It is important that parents should be informed regarding the content of classes on these specific topics and also the approach which will be taken in the classroom. They should also be informed about who will be delivering the teaching, whether that be teaching staff or external providers. This will enable them to make an informed decision on the appropriateness of the lessons for their own child and to facilitate conversation in the home about these important topics.
28. One of the most important issues in the delivery of RSE is that of ethos. Boards of Governors in controlled schools have a legal right to adopt a non-denominational Christian ethos as a valuable framework for nurturing the holistic wellbeing of children and young people, educationally, emotionally, morally and spiritually, and a framework for shaping the teaching and learning in RSE.
29. We feel that individual schools are best placed to judge on when it is age-appropriate for their pupils to receive information about these topics and to determine how best to sensitively approach the content within the local context of their school community.
30. Schools with a non-denominational Christian ethos should therefore have the freedom to teach RSE in line with these values.
31. As mentioned above, it is not possible to deliver RSE in a 'value-neutral' way, as value judgements are constantly being made in terms of what material is

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included, how it is presented, and how discussion about it is encouraged. High-quality RSE within our schools is much more than just information based on legal, biological or medical facts. It involves consideration of behaviours, values and attitudes that bring meaning and purpose to our understanding of healthy and flourishing relationships. Grounding this teaching in the values and attitudes which form the ethos of the school provides that framework which brings meaning and purpose to our understanding.

32. It is recognised that there are some aspects of RSE which are important for children and young people to receive in order that they might engage in healthy, respectful relationships of all types, not only with their peers but also with adults and those who are younger than them. For example, it is important that students understand matters like 'consent', in order to keep themselves safe, and also to ensure that they are treating others well.

Impact of Withdrawal Policies

Study the effects and prevalence of policies allowing parental withdrawal from RSE, and their impact on student access to essential health education.

33. Where parents wish to exercise their right to have their child opt-out of education on the two specific issues legislated for in the new regulations, we feel that the school SMT or pastoral care team are best placed to have a discussion with the parents to explain the content, approach and methodology of the upcoming lessons in the hope that fears can be allayed and the values of the school ethos expressed.
34. Any guidance should consider such instances and guide the school in the sensitive handling and approach to parental requests for an opt-out on these two issues.
35. The balancing of the rights of children/young people with the rights of parents/carers should never lead to a situation where the adults are not informed about what is being taught.

Violence against Women and Girls

Reflect on the recommendations for the school system of the Gillen Review of Serious Sexual Offences, and consider the role that RSE might play in developing consent education to reduce sexual violence, particularly against women and girls.

36. It is in the best interests of the child to receive high quality RSE; it is important children and young people are taught how they might engage in healthy, respectful relationships of all types, not only with their peers but also with adults and those who are younger than them. It is vital that students understand matters like 'consent' in order to keep themselves safe and also to ensure that they are treating others well.

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