



Mini-Inquiry into Relationship and Sexuality Education

The Rainbow Project and HERe NI welcome this mini inquiry into Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) in schools in Northern Ireland. Our organisations advocate for the delivery of evidence-based, inclusive and age-appropriate RSE as a means of reducing social and health inequalities. The primary goal of RSE should be to equip young people with the knowledge they need to make informed decisions regarding their relationship, whether romantic, sexual or platonic, and their reproductive health, upholding the principles of bodily autonomy and personal rights.

Recognising the need for inclusive RSE for marginalised groups in Northern Ireland, the Gillen Review¹ recommended the need to *'include in the school curriculum for disabled children, children with sensory disability and those who are members of marginalised communities' sex education designed in a culturally sensitive manner on matters such as consent, personal space, boundaries, appropriate behaviour, relationships, fears of homophobia and transphobia, gender identity and sexuality.'* It is our expectation that this recommendation is delivered on by the Department to ensure all young people have access to comprehensive and inclusive RSE.

Experiences of LGBTQIA+ Pupils in Education

LGBTQIA+ young people in schools have been poorly served and, both historically and contemporaneously, underrepresented within curriculum content. Twenty-one years after the repeal of Section 28 in England and Wales – legislation which silenced any discussion of LGBTQIA+ identities in schools across Britain, but excluding Northern Ireland – LGBTQIA+ identities are still being branded 'controversial' and avoided by many schools in this region. LGBTQIA+ young people within our services (including our Rainbow Youth group in Foyle and the Cara-Friend youth group in Belfast) have told us that their lack of representation

¹ Sir John Gillen (2019) [Gillen Review Report into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in NI](#)

in education has left them feeling 'lost', 'left out and forgotten' and 'confused, with nowhere to turn to'.

These experiences are reinforced by the Department for Education's own research which explored LGBTQIA+ pupils' experiences of post-primary education.² Over half of pupils stated that sexual orientation and gender identity had not come up in any of their classes; where it had, over 75% heard about it through their Religious Education, while only around 25% of them had heard about it in RSE. When LGBTQIA+ issues were raised, there were mixed results: around a third of respondents said that discussion of sexual orientation was handled well, with a similar proportion stating that it was handled badly, while around two thirds of respondents said that trans issues were handled poorly.

Two thirds of young LGBTQIA+ people surveyed stated that the RSE they had received was unhelpful, with 90% of respondents stating that the RSE they received made no reference to LGBTQIA+ relationships and identities.

Research published at a similar time by LGBTQIA+ organisation Cara-Friend³ found that 84% of pupils surveyed indicated that they had received no information or support regarding sexual orientation or gender identity within their school. At the same time, 72% of LGBTQIA+ youth experienced negative attitudes in school, and 68% had experienced bullying.

Over the past number of weeks, we conducted focus groups with a number of LGBTQIA+ young people seeking their direct experience of RSE in school. They indicated that:

- Many hadn't heard of RSE before;
- Many said they had received 'little to none' or 'nothing was taught' - this may have been compounded by their lack of awareness of what RSE entails;
- A number said they had only experienced discussions of topics around relationships and sexuality within Religious Education;
- A number reported only covering anatomy and biology surrounding menstruation and puberty (for instance, in biology class);
- A majority of young people in our focus groups stated that they mostly sought and found information about RSE and related topics from online resources.

² Department for Education (2017) [Post-Primary School Experiences of 16-21 Year Old People who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and/or Transgender](#)

³ Neill & Meehan (2017) [Still Shouting - The needs and experiences of young people in Northern Ireland who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender \(LGBT\)](#)

Content of RSE

Across Northern Ireland, schools from different denominations and with varying ethos have an ability to 'pick and choose' which topics are covered in their RSE curriculum, as well as deciding how detailed the information is and which external organisations provide this teaching, often leading to topics which are considered core to a comprehensive sex education being excluded or only covered in passing.

Currently the regulations give schools the flexibility to decide on the content of their taught RSE programme, with the exception of information around abortion and prevention of early pregnancy, which are subject to the parental 'opt-out'. It is clear from our engagement with young people that this approach to RSE has not been successful and is not an adequate method of delivery going forward.

Not teaching RSE is incompatible with The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 17), which states: *'Each child (should have) access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral wellbeing and physical and mental health.'*

The right to sexual and reproductive health is an integral part of the right to health and a particular focus in the UNCRC General Comment No. 20 on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence (CRC/GC/20), which states, *"All adolescents should have access to free, confidential, adolescent-responsive and non-discriminatory sexual and reproductive health services, information and education."*

The Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 covers:

- Exploring the qualities of relationships including friendship.
- Exploring the qualities of a loving, respectful relationship.
- Developing coping strategies to deal with challenging relationship scenarios.
- Developing strategies to avoid and resolve conflict.
- Exploring the implications of sexual maturation.
- Exploring the emotional, social and moral implications of early sexual activity
- Developing their understanding of relationships and sexuality and the responsibilities of healthy relationships
- Developing an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of parenting

It was also amended last year to include, under Key Stage 3, "Receive age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion."

The UN Committee for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) found that “young people in Northern Ireland were denied the education necessary to enjoy their sexual and reproductive health and rights.” It criticised the ability for individual schools to pick and choose how RSE is taught based on the school ethos: “Relationship and sexuality education, although a recommended part of the primary and post-primary statutory curriculum of the Department of Education, is underdeveloped or non-existent since it is at the school’s discretion to implement the contents of the curriculum according to its values and ethos.”⁴

It is clear that there are a number of gaps in the topics required under the Minimum Content Order, despite the amendment passed in 2023, and an unequal implementation of this new minimum level of content. While some of the updated guidance, including from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), has made positive steps to be more comprehensive and inclusive, this guidance is not on a statutory footing, nor is it enforced or standardised across schools in Northern Ireland.

From our perspective, there are a number of essential topics missing from the Order:

- Consent
- Violence prevention (particularly gender-based violence)
- Gender equality and stereotyping
- Domestic and sexual abuse
- Menstrual health and wellbeing
- Social media and Online safety
- Inclusion of LGBTQIA+ relationships and sexuality across all content areas

Beyond these absent topics, the reality of coverage of prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion within schools in Northern Ireland is unclear and is subject to parental opt-outs inserted into the regulations by the former Secretary of State. It is worth noting that, in the CEDAW inquiry, while the Committee was specifically challenging the ability of schools to decide their RSE provision based on their ethos, it stated unequivocally that young people ‘were denied the education necessary to enjoy their sexual and reproductive health and rights’.⁵ This denial of rights is not ameliorated because the responsibility has moved from the school to the parent - it remains a denial of rights, regardless of where the decision-making powers lie.

⁴ UN CEDAW (2019) [Inquiry concerning the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland under article 8 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#)

⁵ Ibid

Timing and Teaching

Many of the young people involved in our LGBTQIA+ RSE consultation focus group understood that teachers are often best placed to provide RSE, given their sustained contact with pupils. It is worth noting that a small number of young people disagreed with this, stating that they would feel more comfortable discussing these issues with an external provider who they don't have to see in school every day. However, there was agreement across the board that whoever delivers this content must teach a comprehensive, inclusive and standardised curriculum that covers all areas of RSE and not 'pick and choose' which topics to include.

Our recommendation would be that the Department of Education should upskill specialist staff to deliver relationship and sexuality education, moving away from the dependance on external providers and ensuring the knowledge and expertise around RSE is developed 'in-house' within schools. Many young people felt this content would be best delivered within the context of Learning for Life and Work (LLW), while also acknowledging that there are very rarely specific LLW teachers and rather many teachers teach the LLW content on top of their own specific subject. We would advocate for a move toward specialist LLW teaching staff, who are also directly equipped to deliver RSE content and support pupils with questions, concerns or safeguarding issues relating to young people's relationships and sexuality. Currently RSE is delegated to teachers in school who have gaps in their timetable, leaving them with very little time or expertise to develop materials for their class.

This does not mean excluding external providers from schools altogether; particularly for LGBTQIA+ young people, the delivery of LGBTQIA+ awareness/anti-bullying workshops in schools may be one of the only ways that they currently see themselves visible in a school context. However, bringing in external providers to deliver the whole RSE curriculum is not a sustainable approach and leads to a patchwork provision of RSE differing between different schools, and sometimes even within the same school.⁶ Indeed, some LGBTQIA+ young people we spoke to felt that external facilitators' real or perceived biases lessened their ability to learn and reduced their trust in the information being provided, compared to a dedicated teacher.

It is also important to recognise that RSE is often treated as a 'one and done' exercise - many of those within our focus groups claimed they had received one or two whole-year assemblies covering the topic as the only provision of RSE. The young people we spoke to felt that, often, the RSE they did receive was too little, too late, and failed to meet their needs both in content and timing. It is imperative

⁶ Within our LGBTQIA+ RSE focus group, two individuals who attended the same school reported differing experiences of RSE. One pupil reported receiving comprehensive and useful information about menstruation and access to period products, while the other did not receive this information.

that RSE starts early with age-appropriate content, and scales to meet the needs of young people as they progress through education.

LGBTQIA+ Inclusion within RSE

As explored above, LGBTQIA+ young people don't see themselves represented within the educational curriculum, and where they do, their identities and experiences are often up for debate. We strongly believe that LGBTQIA+ lives and identities should be integrated across all areas of the curriculum, not just RSE. However, we specifically view RSE as a key vehicle for reducing and eventually eliminating many of the social and health inequalities experienced by LGBTQIA+ young people.

In the current provision of RSE, even where the content taught is otherwise good practice and comprehensive, these topics are often presented through a heteronormative lens, prioritising discussion of cisgender and heterosexual relationships and sex at the expense of those relationships experienced by LGBTQIA+ people. Many teachers and external providers either don't feel equipped to explore LGBTQIA+ relationships and sex, don't want to do so, or believe the school within which this content is being delivered would not want them to do so.

As a result, LGBTQIA+ pupils have reported feeling 'left out and forgotten' within RSE that doesn't cover their needs and experiences. Some reported that LGBTQIA+ identities were relegated to a 'little subtopic, which then led into a debate about whether homosexuality was good or bad'. All of those who reported positive experiences of RSE had these experiences outside of school, from community-based providers such as LGBTQIA+ youth groups or other non-LGBTQIA+-specific youth services.

To ensure the benefits of expanding and improving RSE apply to all pupils equally, we would strongly encourage the implementation of a statutory requirement for RSE to be inclusive of and accessible to all pupils regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, race, disability, and religious background. This would require concerted work with both organisations representing those communities as well as individual pupils from those backgrounds.

We view RSE not only as an opportunity to provide vital information and learning to improve the lives of young people themselves, but also as a tool for affecting change in wider society. RSE is seen, rightly, as a key pillar in addressing misogynistic and wider gender-based violence, including sexual violence⁷, as referenced in the Gillen Review.⁸ Further research has uncovered the impact of

⁷ Ting S. (2009) [Meta-analysis on dating violence prevention among middle and high schools](#); Foshee, Bauman et al (2004) [Assessing the long-term effects of the safe dates program and a booster in preventing and reducing adolescent dating violence victimization and perpetration](#)

⁸ Ibid

finding that inclusive curricula reduces experiences of homophobia and specifically homophobic bullying within educational settings.⁹ While much of the research on this area focuses on efforts to integrate LGBTQIA+ themes across the curriculum, RSE has been identified as a key determinate in creating an LGBTQIA+-inclusive environment within schools.¹⁰

In developing and implementing RSE, we strongly support involving children and young people in shaping the curriculum. This approach helps foster their self-governance, emotional resilience, and provides young people with buy-in on the content they are taught. Ultimately, we want to empower young people to make informed, respectful, and confident decisions about their sexual and reproductive health, including providing them with the ability to inform and direct their learning to topics most useful to them.

All but one of the young people we spoke to through our focus groups had never been asked their views on relationship and sexuality education, despite the requirement for schools to consult broadly with staff, parents and pupils in the development of their RSE curriculum. The one young person who had been consulted had this experience outside of school, through an external youth service. All young people were keen to share their views with the Department and their individual schools, as long as this feedback remained confidential.

The impact of limited RSE

Overall, the young people we spoke to felt within this group that if correct and relevant information is not provided to them, they would go looking for it themselves, on the internet, where they may get wrong or misleading information. Frequently, RSE programmes may involve challenging myths and misconceptions as it relates to areas such as the transmission of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), conception through non-penetrative sex, and other pieces of misinformation which, if left unchallenged, could cause harm to young people and/or their partners later in life.

This led to young people identifying that, should they be removed from classes their peers are attending through the 'opt-out', they can still discover the same information from a third-party, which presents a risk of the information being distorted. The young people also identified a clear generational divide in getting this information from their parents, particularly in relation to the use of technology and social media in interpersonal relationships.

⁹ Richard G et al (2015) [Discussing sexual orientation and gender in classrooms: A testimonial-based approach to fighting homophobia in schools](#); Baams, Dubas & van Aken (2017) [Comprehensive sexuality education as a longitudinal predictor of LGBTQ name-calling and perceived willingness to intervene in school](#)
Goldfarb & Lieberman (2021) [Three Decades of Research: The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education](#)

¹⁰ Snapp, McGuire et al (2015) [LGBTQ-inclusive curricula: Why supportive curricula matter](#)

Where parents are affirming and supportive of their LGBTQIA+ child, they may benefit from having conversations with them about these topics. However, it is worth noting that not all LGBTQIA+ people come from affirming families. If a young person does not have an affirming family, and does not have support or access to information in an affirming school, they may be at increased risk of low self-esteem, shame and self-loathing. This was illustrated in the Cara-Friend 'Still Shouting' Report (2017), which found that:

- 52% of LGBTQ+ young people self harm;
- 72% of LGBTQ+ youth experienced negative attitudes in school;
- 68% of LGBTQ+ youth had experienced bullying in school;
- 61% of LGB young people reported contemplating suicide.

Conclusion

We thank you for the opportunity to be able to bring these issues to the Committee. It is clear to us that all pupils, not only LGBTQIA+ pupils, are being let down by the standards of RSE in schools currently. We would like to reinforce that RSE should be delivered in-house, by upskilled specialist RSE teachers who are fully equipped and supported with resources by the Department of Education to deliver a comprehensive, inclusive and evidence-based curriculum. We will be submitting further written evidence to the mini-inquiry in due course.

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