

## **Statement of Principles of the Board of Education of the Methodist Church in Ireland regarding the teaching of Relationships and Sexuality Education in schools in Northern Ireland.**

The Methodist Church in Ireland (MCI) is committed to supporting effective, high-quality Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) that respects young people's needs and encourages them to explore their own heritage and emerging values. We are of the opinion that RSE should always be delivered sensitively and inclusively, integrating school policies on bullying and safeguarding. We do not believe that RSE can be completely morally neutral and neither can it be taught in a vacuum but rather that lessons should include consideration of and respectful discussion around the ethical implications surrounding RSE, and indeed all sensitive topics within the school curriculum. The MCI believes that the ethos of the school should be a central consideration in the delivery of RSE.

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

#### **Curriculum Integration and Content**

The MCI believes that the teaching of RSE should be of the highest quality, encouraging critical thinking about moral and ethical viewpoints. Education on sensitive topics cannot be value-free, as every approach is influenced by a particular worldview about the meaning and purpose of relationships and sexuality. 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. Thus, RSE should address the holistic needs of students and be delivered in a supportive environment where students feel safe to express their views.

The MCI has a lot of confidence that teachers and school management teams in cooperation with their Boards of Governance are very capable of designing a curriculum which is suitable for the context of their particular school as provided for in the current arrangements. We accept that this must include teaching the two elements of content mandated by the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland – contraception and access to abortion services.

#### **Policy Implementation and School Compliance**

The MCI strongly advises every school to develop a policy for RSE, in collaboration with their stakeholders including governors, parents, and pupils. Policies should reflect the school's ethos, should regularly be reviewed and should be made easily accessible to parents and prospective parents. Consultation with the whole-school community is essential when proposing significant policy changes.

Lessons in RSE should be age-appropriate and encourage critical thinking to a level in-keeping with the cognitive and emotional development of the child, and always having the best interests of the child in mind. The MCI believes that the class teacher is best placed to select topics and approaches which will be most suitable for their own class, school and community context rather than being forced to teach mandated content and to use an approach with which they ethically and morally disagree.

## **Resources and Support for RSE**

The MCI recognizes the need for improved RSE resources and supports wide consultation with education stakeholders in their development. We are happy to have been included by the CCEA in their consultation regarding guidance for teachers and resources developed for the teaching of the two new curricular areas mandated by the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

We are of the opinion that resources produced for the teaching of RSE must present moral and ethical issues clearly and with respect for differing worldviews. Such resources should also affirm the choice to abstain from sexual activity, aligning with governmental health promotion policies and should not presume that all, or even the majority of young people are sexually active within the age-range of the secondary school. The MCI supports the ongoing development of the RSE Hub, the development of engaging and comprehensive, age-appropriate resources as well as relevant, interactive, professional development for teachers at both ITE and CPD level.

## **Teacher Training and External Providers**

The MCI supports training for all teachers in delivering RSE during their initial teacher education and advocates for regular, fully funded, professional development in this area for working teachers. If external providers are being used to provide RSE in a school, they should first present their proposed lesson content to the school and ensure alignment with their values and ethos. We believe it is crucial that the class teachers should be present during any externally presented sessions to facilitate the follow-up discussions which will inevitably occur.

Parents and carers should also be made aware of the content and topics to be covered by any external groups brought into the school to deliver sessions on RSE. Information about the ethos and values of the external organisations should be provided and should include links to the organisation's website so that parents can find out more details about the programme being delivered and the organisation delivering it.

## **Monitoring and Evaluation**

The MCI recognises the most recent ETI report into the delivery of RSE as a positive step forward in accurately mapping the work carried out in schools. We remain confident that due

to the end of action short of strike, 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.

## **Stakeholder Engagement and Inclusivity**

The MCI believes that parents/carers bear primary responsibility for educating their children about relationships and sexuality. Consequently, parents and carers should be informed about upcoming RSE content and teaching approaches in order to facilitate home discussions. We believe that the ethos of the school plays a crucial role in RSE delivery, and that it is important that schools have the autonomy to approach topics according to their values.

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.

It is recognised that there are some aspects of RSE which are vitally important for children and young people to receive in order that they might engage in healthy, respectful relationships of all types. 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**

While recognising the rights of parents who wish to opt their child out of specific RSE topics, the MCI suggests that, in such cases, school staff should sensitively discuss content and methodologies in advance of the classes in order to alleviate concerns. Guidance to schools should remind them of their duty to ensure parents are informed about RSE content, and of the need to balance the rights of children and parents.

## **Violence against Women and Girls**

Teaching young people about healthy relationships is vital. Understanding consent and the characteristics of a healthy and respectful relationship is essential in order for young people to keep themselves safe and to ensure the respectful treatment of others. The MCI is committed to the education of young women and young men in the values of mutual respect, equality and love in order to prevent violence against women and girls.