

Mini Inquiry into Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE)

15 November 2024

1. NASUWT welcomes the opportunity to give evidence to the Assembly Education Committee's Mini-Inquiry into Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) in schools.
2. NASUWT - The Teachers' Union represents teachers and principals in Northern Ireland and across the United Kingdom.
3. The union notes that there has been a lot of misinformation, most of it malicious, since the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland introduced regulations to give effect to commitments arising from the United Kingdom's obligations as a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

GENERAL COMMENTS

4. In relation to the questions set out by committee in the questionnaire, the Union has the following comments to make.
5. The union believes that the current topics for personal development and mutual understanding (PDMU) are age appropriate for children in Primary 3 to Primary 7 but should be mandatory and should be taught in an age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate manner. In addition, the union believe the list of topics should be expanded to include consent; safe and unsafe relationships; and domestic violence and abuse.
6. The NASUWT does not see any reason why the current topics for the current post-primary RSE programme should not be mandatory.

Debates around ethos should not impinge on the rights of young people to have full understanding of relationships and sexuality and the responsibilities of healthy relationships. The union believe that the following topics should also form part of the RSE programme: Healthy and unhealthy relationships – spotting red flags; how to seek support; Misogyny-understanding the pyramid of sexual violence; navigating social media; and Image Based Sexual Abuse.

7. The CCEA hub is a useful resource for teachers to discuss Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE). There are a range of appropriate thematic lesson plans covering the voluntary aspects of the RSE curriculum along with opportunities for engaging young people in the key areas of RSE. There is further potential to develop greater audio-visual resources to engage young people as there is an over reliance on written based scenarios within some of the materials. The NASUWT notes professional development, and training is limited to pre-recorded webinars and links to other resources. To ensure the RSE curriculum is robust and fit for purpose there needs to be investment in providing time and training for teachers to prepare the RSE curriculum with a specific focus on how to deal with responses the lessons may elicit from the pupils.
8. The NASUWT believes there needs to be a comprehensive training package (including in person) developed to support schools and teachers in developing their RSE Curriculum utilising the CCEA resources, that includes in person specialised training and supporting material/teaching notes. This will equip teachers with the confidence to deliver RSE topics, and the ability to challenge and enhance the discussions with pupils around sensitive topics. It will also ensure there is a consistency in the delivery of the resources across schools.
9. Currently there is a range of approaches taken by schools to deliver RSE programmes in schools. The union believes that this should be determined by the educational setting, as each will have unique needs, e.g. some aspects of content might be best delivered by teachers, whilst others may need to be delivered by a third party specialist provider. All

teachers who are required to deliver RSE should have training provided by their employer during normal working hours. Consideration needs to be given as to how this may be incorporated within Initial Teacher Training. Teachers who express an interest in delivering the RSE curriculum need to have access to specialised training, time and resources to develop the RSE delivery within their school. To ensure the provision is consistent across schools there needs to be a quality control framework developed by ETI in conjunction with trade unions to inspect policy and provision within schools.

Third Party Providers

10. NASUWT notes that Love for Life delivers RSE, providing programmes and lesson plans in over 75% of Post-Primary schools and over 40% of Primary Schools across Northern Ireland. Each of the programmes cover a range of relevant RSE topics in approximately a 2 hour period. Given the breadth of topics delivered in a short space of time (which may be triggering for some pupils) it is likely that this will elicit further questions or need for more in depth consideration and discussion, it is unclear how this is facilitated by the schools after the sessions. It is difficult to ascertain how pupils' knowledge and understanding is measured and how schools equip teachers to follow up the topics introduced in the sessions in a meaningful way. Therefore, NASUWT would have some concerns that widespread use of third-party providers may become a tick boxing exercise by schools to cover the RSE curriculum.
11. NASUWT believes there needs to be an objective method of quality control to evaluate the provision by third party providers and how it is developed further in schools to deepen pupils' knowledge and understanding of the issues raised after the sessions are delivered.

Diversity

12. Without an audit of current provision of what is being delivered in schools it is difficult to ascertain to what extent RSE is delivered in a respectful way of all genders, sexualities and respectful of newcomer cultures.

Schools need guidance, training and materials to enable them to embed this within their RSE curriculum to ensure consistency across educational settings.

Opting Out

13. The unions does not believe that parents should be able to opt out of their children being taught RSE in schools. This is consistent with our position on the rest of the school curriculum. Moreover, the union believes there is a safeguarding risk for pupils who are withdrawn from RSE. As cited in *‘Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission – Relationship and Sexuality Education in Post Primary Schools In Northern Ireland: A Compelling Case for Reform’* the Committee of Parties to the CoE Lanzarote Convention (Lanzarote Committee) has stated that: ‘the fact that children are frequently victims of sexual violence within the family framework and by persons close to them or in their “circle of trust” should be highlighted and considers that the school environment is particularly appropriate to do so.’
14. Pupils who are withdrawn may be already in a vulnerable situation within their own homes but will not be equipped with the knowledge of how to recognise unhealthy behaviours and seek support. Equally, all pupils should have access to quality age appropriate RSE to enable them to recognise, form and maintain healthy relationships, develop understanding of how to seek, refuse or give consent across a variety of situations and relationship contexts. Without access to the knowledge, information and opportunity to engage in discussion in a controlled educational environment pupils may be placed at risk of harm in the future.

Consent and Violence against Women and Girls

15. Consent education is an important element of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE). We need to broaden understanding of what consent is beyond confines of discussing how it relates to a sexual

context. Consent is fundamental to all relationships, not just ones of a sexual nature, which is why it needs to be introduced in an age-appropriate manner from an early age. Teaching children and young people about consent will develop their communication skills, including non-verbal communication, support them to establish boundaries around what they feel comfortable or uncomfortable with, and enable them to advocate for themselves and others.

16. Self-advocacy is critical to our mental health and well-being. Developing knowledge and understanding of consent in all its forms and in different contexts, will foster mutual respect for others. Therefore, it is a crucial element of their development as an individual and as responsible member of society.
17. The union would you be concerned if consent education was not part of RSE as healthy relationships cannot be exist without consent.
18. The World Health Organisation defines Sexual Violence as "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, or other act directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting." The Sexual Offences (NI) Order 2008, states 'a person consents if he or she agrees by choice and has the freedom and capacity to make that choice'. NASUWT believe that for young people to fully understand that sexual violence is a result of the absence of consent, they need to be educated on what the 'freedom and capacity' to make choices, looks like in a variety of different scenarios. This includes situations where the boundaries can be blurred, navigating the challenges posed by increased access to technology, and misogynistic attitudes portrayed on social media that reinforce rape myths and a culture of victim blaming which perpetuate the cycle of violence against women and girls in our society.
19. Fundamental to preventing violence against women and girls is understanding the role consent plays in all relationships, whether they are sexual in nature or not. Nobody has the right to anyone else's body and developing and understanding of consent from an early age in an age-appropriate manner will develop body autonomy and confidence.

This will promote greater mutual respect and understanding and empower individuals to challenge unwanted behaviour when they experience or witness it. Consent education should include:

- How to establish and respect boundaries in relationships
- How to ask for consent
- How to respond when consent is given
- How to respond when consent is withdraw

Reform

20. The NASUWT believe we need to reform RSE to ensure that young people in our society are educated and empowered to form secure, meaningful and healthy relationships, based on mutual respect. Young people report that the focus on biological facts whilst important does not equip them with the skills to navigate ever more complex nuanced relationships. Education on consent, sex and healthy relationships should begin at Primary School, and that discussions around consent should reflect and be contextualised to the student experience at their specific age.

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