

Written Submission for the Inquiry  
into the Provision of Relationships  
and Sexuality Education (RSE) in  
Northern Ireland Schools



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# Exploring Relationships and Sex Education using Philosophy with Children (PwC)

**Dr Suzanne Whitten**

Senior Lecturer in Political Theory and Philosophy  
Association Director of Education  
School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics  
Queen's University Belfast  
[Suzanne.whitten@qub.ac.uk](mailto:Suzanne.whitten@qub.ac.uk)

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## i. Introduction

This briefing paper is designed to inform discussion around the Inquiry on the Provision of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) on the Northern Ireland Curriculum. The Inquiry was launched in September 2024 by the Assembly Committee for Education towards the aim of assessing the current RSE provision in the region and to explore how it might be revised to reflect recent changes to legislation.

In this briefing paper, I provide a sketch of how a philosophy-focused approach to RSE provision might be used to help deal with some of the current challenges experienced by educators attempting to deliver on this component of the curriculum, which includes:

- Uncertainty about how to actually *deliver* effective teaching on relationships and sexuality without relying on either a completely open-ended 'anything goes' discussion format or else falling back on overly narrow scientific or legal understandings of key concepts and themes;

- Concerns about the increased influence of social media in the lives of children and young people, including the potential detrimental effects it has on building healthy relationships;
- A desire to provide children and young people with the opportunity to share, explore, and critically assess *pre-existing* attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions but not knowing how to do so in an academically appropriate and sensitive way.

In section ii. I provide a summary of existing RSE provision in Northern Ireland (NI), before outlining some of the issues that prompted the Inquiry in the first place. Section iii. briefly explains the background and main principles of ‘Philosophy with Children’ (PwC) as a set of pedagogical practices. In section iv. I sketch out the role that PwC could play in responding to some of the current issues identified in existing RSE provision. Section v. concludes.

## ii. Relationships and Sexuality Education in Northern Ireland: Current Challenges

The statutory curriculum requires<sup>1</sup> the provision of RSE for all pupils in NI, delivered under Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) for primary pupils and Learning for Life and Work (LLW) for those at the secondary level. The overall purpose of the NI Curriculum is to “empower young people to develop their potential to make informed and responsible choices and decisions throughout their lives.”<sup>2</sup> The central role that interpersonal relationships and sexuality play in all of our lives means that an effective RSE programme is an absolutely critical part of any curriculum concerned with the future flourishing of children and young people. It is therefore essential that educators in the region are effectively equipped with the training, guidance, and tools necessary to be able to deliver on RSE appropriately and according to a clear set of benchmarks.

In 2024 the Assembly Committee for Education launched the Inquiry on the Provision of RSE on the NI Curriculum. The Inquiry was prompted by two main events:

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<sup>1</sup> The Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 outlines the statutory minimum entitlements of provision of RSE for pupils in the region.

<sup>2</sup> <https://ccea.org.uk/downloads/docs/ccea-asset/Curriculum/The%20Northern%20Ireland%20Curriculum%20-%20Primary.pdf> (p.4).

1. The April 2023 publication of an evaluation,<sup>3</sup> conducted by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and commissioned by the Department of Education, on the delivery of the preventative curriculum. The evaluation itself was prompted, among other things, by a growing recognition of the central role that effective RSE can play in the wider fight against discrimination, sexual abuse, and violence against women and girls.<sup>4</sup>

Despite overall positive results, the evaluation noted haphazard, and frequently ineffective, implementation of RSE provision across schools in the region, where lack of teacher confidence and specialist knowledge were cited as two common causes.<sup>5</sup> Additional concerns highlighted by the ETI included the rising influence of social media on children and young people and the potentially negative effects this has on relationships, wellbeing, and mental health.<sup>6</sup> Pupil responses during the evaluation also indicate frustration at the lack of opportunities to influence the choice of topics covered during RSE.<sup>7</sup> Additional concerns were raised about the lack of inclusivity of LGBTQ+ issues within existing RSE provision.<sup>8</sup>

2. Recent legislative amendments<sup>9</sup> that require the provision of age-appropriate education on “reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion.”<sup>10</sup>

The following sections explain how a PwC approach to teaching and learning might prove especially beneficial in responding to the above challenges.

### iii. Philosophy with Children (PwC)

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/the-preventative-curriculum-in-schools-and-education-other-than-at-school-eotas-centres\\_0.pdf](https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/the-preventative-curriculum-in-schools-and-education-other-than-at-school-eotas-centres_0.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> For instance, the Gillen review (2019) recommended the implementation of a standardized RSE curriculum as part of the strategy for dealing with serious sexual offences. RSE provision also featured prominently in the 2023 Action Plan for Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAWG).

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/the-preventative-curriculum-in-schools-and-education-other-than-at-school-eotas-centres\\_0.pdf](https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/the-preventative-curriculum-in-schools-and-education-other-than-at-school-eotas-centres_0.pdf) (pp.33-38).

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/the-preventative-curriculum-in-schools-and-education-other-than-at-school-eotas-centres\\_0.pdf](https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/the-preventative-curriculum-in-schools-and-education-other-than-at-school-eotas-centres_0.pdf) (p.6).

<sup>7</sup> (*ibid.*, p.18).

<sup>8</sup> (*ibid.*, pp.23-25).

<sup>9</sup> Notably, amendments to the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 and the Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 in respect of Learning for Life and Work (LLW) to require pupils in Key Stages 3 and 4 to “Receive age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion” (Article 5(1A)).

<sup>10</sup> Itself a response to the recent changes to the legal status of abortion in NI.

### iii.i Background

The umbrella term ‘PwC’ refers to a range of practices and methods that endorse a philosophical approach to teaching and learning.<sup>11</sup> Common to PwC is a focus on dialogical inquiry on open-ended concepts or themes,<sup>12</sup> where discussions unfold collaboratively according to a set of ground rules that stress respectful- yet critical- engagement.

One popular way of organising a PwC lesson is by using ‘Community of Inquiry’ (CoI) practices.<sup>13</sup> Here, participants begin seated in a circle or horseshoe formation, before being ‘eased into’ collaborative dialogue using short philosophy-based games or icebreakers.<sup>14</sup> For the main inquiry, participants are first exposed to a stimulus, which can include, among other things, a video clip, poem, news article, social media post, excerpt from a book, or anecdote. Initial engagement with the stimulus prompts the creation of a philosophical question or claim, from which the rest of the discussion unfolds. For this, the facilitator (teacher) guides participants through a structured dialogue using philosophical methods (e.g., Socratic questioning). At the end of each session, there is a short reflection and ‘summing up’ period. This is necessary to provide ‘closure’ on a discussion and provides the chance to think about what participants learned from themselves and one another during the session. It also serves to

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<sup>11</sup> One prominent strand of PwC, called ‘Philosophy for Children (P4C)’, began in the United States in the 1960s with Columbia University professor Matthew Lipman. See Lipman (1988, 2002) and Lipman and Sharp (1978).

<sup>12</sup> PwC can be used to explore an extremely broad range of discipline-specific topics as well as ‘real life’ events and issues. So long as the starting statement or question is of the ‘open-ended’ variety, a philosophical inquiry can be carried out. Some example discussion topics include:

- History: ‘When (if ever) is war justified?’, ‘Is it fair to judge people of the past according to today’s standards?’
- Geography: ‘Does where we’re born tell us anything important about who we are?’, ‘Are cities ‘unnatural?’’
- Science: ‘Is it ethical to conduct experiments on animals?’, ‘What counts as ‘evidence’ in science?’
- Religious Studies: ‘Do we have a duty to help strangers in need?’, ‘Are there limits to forgiveness?’
- Current events/topical issues: ‘Should mobile phones be banned in schools?’, ‘Is it wrong to buy fast fashion?’

<sup>13</sup> Many educators in NI will be familiar with CoI principles already. The ‘Teaching Controversial Issues’ resources provided by CCEA, for example, specifically recommend inquiry-based teaching for the teaching of contentious or sensitive topics (see <https://ccea.org.uk/learning-resources/teaching-controversial-issues>). The PwC approach outlined here builds on these practices to also provide educators with the additional tools necessary to ensure such discussions meet particular intellectual standards

<sup>14</sup> Games that get participants into a ‘philosophical mindset’ are those that require ‘picking a side’ on some issue before justifying your decision with a reason. ‘Would you rather?’ games or ‘walking debates’ are particularly useful for this purpose.

remind participants of some of the main debates and issues that arose (or perhaps didn't) during discussion on the topic.

Progress during sessions is measured by the degree to which the group advance understanding of the question or theme according to standards of philosophical practice. For example, facilitators can ensure that participants justify their arguments with relevant reasons, consider and respond to alternative points of view, listen respectfully to the views of others, demonstrate recognition of potential counterarguments, and can identify hidden assumptions, faulty reasoning, and logical fallacies in the arguments presented. Importantly, these methods, when practiced in an age-appropriate manner, have been proven to trigger philosophical thinking in children of all stages and abilities.

The inclusive and collaborative aims of PwC are such that all participants are recognised as offering a valuable contribution to the task at hand. However, while the facilitator must ensure that participants treat one another with respect, they are also required to nurture critical and logical thinking. Rather than pointing to participants' flaws in reasoning directly, the structured process *itself*- guided by appropriate reflection and questioning- is designed to help participants critically reflect upon and better justify their positions.

PwC is thus a flexible and inclusive pedagogy that combines intellectual rigour with the advancement of skills associated with social and emotional intelligence.<sup>15</sup> PwC serves an important function in fostering cross-curricular skills in oracy, listening, and critical and collaborative thinking.<sup>16</sup> Importantly, PwC also equips children and young people with the epistemological virtues and habits necessary for understanding, linking together, and applying the broad knowledge base gained from all other parts of the curriculum.<sup>17</sup> Deeper knowledge is advanced by working consistently with common concepts throughout the child's school career, consistently building on previous knowledge and ensuring coherence across subjects.<sup>18</sup>

### iii.ii Benefits of PwC

Numerous studies have demonstrated both cognitive and non-cognitive benefits of philosophy education for children. Regular sessions have been shown to produce long-term cognitive

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Gardner (2015) and D'Olimpio (2015).

<sup>16</sup> See Davey (2005) and Cleghorn (2002).

<sup>17</sup> See Gatley (2021).

<sup>18</sup> This is evidenced by a recent systematic review by Ab Wahab *et al.* (2022) on the effectiveness of philosophy for children.

outcomes in the form of improved literacy and oracy, logical thinking, and critical reasoning.<sup>19</sup> Studies that explore the non-cognitive benefits have shown that philosophy sessions improve the self-esteem of children, decrease levels of anxiety, and improve emotional regulation.<sup>20</sup> Further reported social benefits include an increased level of empathy, open-mindedness, and an improved tendency to engage in teamwork and avoid social conflict in the classroom.<sup>21</sup> Progress across the above areas have also proven particularly beneficial for children with special educational needs (SEN).<sup>22</sup> In addition, teachers consistently report a number of positive benefits of introducing philosophy to their pedagogy.<sup>23</sup> Finally, philosophy interventions have been shown to produce no or negligible negative outcomes for participants, and their cost-effectiveness in comparison to other educational interventions has been demonstrated by numerous research studies and reviews.<sup>24</sup>

#### iv. PwC and RSE Provision: A Brief Sketch

In this section, I provide a brief sketch of some of the main benefits of adopting a PwC-focused style of RSE provision as part of the NI Curriculum. In particular, I point to some of the ways such a programme might help deal with the issues identified at the beginning of this briefing paper.

##### iv.i Building on a Democratic Ethos

When practised correctly, RSE should empower children and young people with the knowledge, empathy, and socio-emotional skills needed to live a rich and fulfilling life with others.<sup>25</sup> While much of the content within current RSE provision concerns matters of scientific or legal fact, a large proportion of the areas that must be covered are those pertaining to

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<sup>19</sup> For instance, see Gorard *et al.* (2017) for the benefits of regular sessions on reading, writing, and mathematical ability in children, especially for those on free school meals (FSM). A 2022 meta-analysis by the Education Endowment Foundation found improved metacognitive and self-regulation skills, oracy skills, and collaborative learning skills in children, again with greater effects for the most disadvantaged. A number of studies carried out in Dundee schools (Topping and Trickey 2007a) demonstrated significant improvements in verbal and non-verbal reasoning for those children who engaged in regular philosophy sessions. A two-year follow-up showed continued improvement in these areas for those who took part in the study and deterioration in those who did not (Topping and Trickey 2007b). See also Millet and Tapper (2012), Garcia-Morison *et al.* (2005),

<sup>20</sup> A large-scale study by Siddiqui *et al.* (2022) showed that philosophy sessions improved the self-esteem and confidence of participating children, in addition to nurturing skills in communication and social emotional attitudes. Similar effects on non-cognitive outcomes can be found in Lord *et al.* (2021), Splitter and Sharp (1995),

<sup>21</sup> See Giménez-Dasí *et al.* (2013).

<sup>22</sup> For instance, see Cassidy *et al.* (2017).

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Gregson *et al.* (2008), Lam (2021), Björnsson (2023), and Jensen (2020).

<sup>24</sup> See Gorard *et al.* (2017).

<sup>25</sup> See Archard (1998).

sensitive and open-ended questions of value, personal belief, and/or so-called ‘essentially contested concepts’<sup>26</sup>. Making pedagogical progress on such matters requires- first and foremost- establishing relationships of *trust* within the classroom itself. A lack of interpersonal trust within the classroom setting not only discourages participation in discussion, thereby increasing the risk of conflict, but also gets in the way of the successful pursuit of *knowledge*. This is supported by extensive social scientific research on affective and epistemic polarisation which demonstrates that, absent a background of trust, measures that aim to reduce intergroup hostility or to correct false beliefs by appealing to ‘top-down’ instruction or additional factual information are very often futile.<sup>27</sup>

PwC methods and principles, such as those summarised in iii.i above, have been proven to be effective in fostering positive affective relations, trust, and a democratic ethos among participants to an inquiry.<sup>28</sup> Specifically, the commitment to equal voice, collaboration, mutual respect, and tolerance of difference found in ‘Community of Inquiry’ (CoI) practices provide the conditions necessary for successful democratic deliberation among participants, while the rigour of philosophical dialogue serves to nurture intellectual virtues of open-mindedness, curiosity, and humility.

An RSE framework rooted in PwC practices thus provides educators with a clear route to establishing the kind of trust necessary to pursue teaching on open-ended questions of value. Additionally, by fostering a democratic ethos within the classroom, PwC can provide the opportunities for exercising *voice* during RSE lessons that pupils report are currently missing from RSE provision.<sup>29</sup>

#### iv.ii Concept Work

As mentioned above, much of the content of RSE provision concerns concepts or themes that are of an ‘open-ended’ and contentious nature, meaning that ‘top-down’ instruction on matters of scientific or legal fact is insufficient for nurturing proper understanding. These ‘essentially contested concepts’ include, for example, ‘friendship’, ‘respect’, ‘consent’, ‘control’, ‘trust’, and ‘perfection’, among many others. Educators commonly report struggling to deliver effective teaching in these areas, partly due to the lack of clear guidance available as to how to measure understanding and progress in the study of concepts and questions of an open-ended

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<sup>26</sup> See Gallie (1956).

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Ecker *et al.* (2022).

<sup>28</sup> See Di Masi and Santi (2016) and Bartels *et al.* (2018).

<sup>29</sup> [https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/the-preventative-curriculum-in-schools-and-education-other-than-at-school-eotas-centres\\_0.pdf](https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/the-preventative-curriculum-in-schools-and-education-other-than-at-school-eotas-centres_0.pdf), (p.18).

nature. In response to increased demand for such guidance, CCEA introduced the RSE Progression Framework<sup>30</sup> in 2022. This (non-statutory) framework- accompanied by a rich ‘hub’<sup>31</sup> of online resources- offers a structured and evidence-based set of themes and lesson plans that are designed to increase the ease with which teachers implement RSE in their schools.

Crucially, the lesson plans provided by CCEA recognise the importance of dialogue in fostering greater understanding. In the section on ‘Consent’ for post-primary, for instance, lesson plans encourage group discussion as a way of exploring the *meaning* of consent, the *contexts* in which consent applies, and the *consequences* of non-consent, particularly in sexual scenarios.<sup>32</sup> The ‘Teaching notes’ section recognises the likelihood that pupils will express different opinions on these matters. In the end, however, class discussion is designed to act as a precursor to achieving *specific* knowledge on the theme in question. The ultimate aim of the lesson on ‘Consent in a Sexual Relationships’<sup>33</sup>, for example, is for pupils to have achieved knowledge of a specific definition of consent, and to have gained an understanding of the conditions under which consent can be given.<sup>34</sup>

While it is essential to familiarise pupils with a working *practical* definition of consent, however, it is absolutely crucial that they are also capable of understanding its open-ended and contested nature. Consent is not something that can be easily determined by an identifying set of criteria, nor are all subjective interpretations of the concept (such as those that might emerge during class discussion) equally valid. In order for pupils to gain a deep understanding of consent, such that they are capable of intelligently and flexibly applying it within different contexts, teachers must therefore facilitate discussion in a way which is both collaborative *and* critically engaging according to a clear set of philosophical standards. This includes allowing a space where existing opinions can be shared and properly justified using reasons, assumptions can be challenged, and potential errors in reasoning explored. Simply offering opportunities for pupils to share their subjective opinions before revealing the ‘real’ definition of consent is not enough.

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<sup>30</sup> [https://ccea.org.uk/downloads/docs/ccea-asset/Resources/RSE%20Progression%20Framework\\_2.pdf](https://ccea.org.uk/downloads/docs/ccea-asset/Resources/RSE%20Progression%20Framework_2.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> <https://ccea.org.uk/learning-resources/relationships-and-sexuality-education-rse/about-relationships-and-sexuality>

<sup>32</sup> <https://ccea.org.uk/learning-resources/relationships-and-sexuality-education-rse/consent>

<sup>33</sup> <https://ccea.org.uk/downloads/docs/ccea-asset/Resource/Unit%205%3A%20Consent%20in%20a%20Sexual%20Relationship.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> Understood as “consent is an agreement given willingly and freely by someone who has the capacity to decide.” (*ibid.*, p.2).

RSE provision that recognises the essentially contested nature of these core concepts will include lessons that allow such open-ended conceptual analysis to be pursued. Importantly, lessons that employ PwC methods provide a fruitful structure for discussion without discounting important prescriptive (factual) elements, such as legal definitions. Instead, legal definitions can be compared, weighed up, and assessed alongside competing ‘folk’ understandings, as well as those found within the wealth of philosophical literature on the subject.

Along such lines, a lesson plan on consent that is rooted in PwC methods might be centred around some of the following discussion questions, all of which can be enriched by drawing on the existing philosophical literature:

- Why (and how) does consent matter morally?
- What does it mean to have the capacity to consent?
- What does it mean to say that consent is ‘freely given’?
- Why does consent matter in some situations more than others?
- What is wrong about a violation of privacy?

In addition to acquiring knowledge of a sufficient working definition of consent, then, pupils should come away with a deeper understanding of *why* consent is so significant and the diverse situations in which it is ethically important.

#### iv.iii Exploring Ethical Values

Another common issue reported by teachers tasked with delivering RSE concerns uncertainty about how to teach matters of an ethical nature in a professional and evidence-based way. For example, how might a productive class on ‘cyberbullying’ be delivered without relying on factual matters (i.e., the law, school policy), subjective opinion, or vague appeals to ‘human rights’? Similarly, how might teachers facilitate lessons on ‘appropriate’ online behaviour, ‘healthy’ relationships, and sexual ethics in ways that are educationally constructive yet non-moralising?

Again, as a branch of RSE replete with ‘essentially contested concepts’, deepening our understanding of ethical issues requires drawing on philosophical methods and principles. The aim is not to avoid discussions of value completely, nor to endorse a sort of ‘ethical relativism’ whereby each opinion is weighed as equally valid. Instead, and as discussed in the previous sections, issues and perspectives should be explored and tested throughout the course of a structured, respectful dialogical inquiry that is guided by standards of logic, reasonableness, and validity.

Indeed, it is also important to remember that ethical values are already implicit in the background of a discussion even before it has started. This is because the democratic structure

and ethos of a philosophical inquiry always already *begins* from an implicit set of assumptions regarding the equality and dignity of all members of the class. By recognising that learning is collaborative and that each pupil has a valuable contribution to make, shared ethical commitments to equal respect are reinforced. Such collaborative practices also help dispel the sort of ‘black and white’ and rigid thinking that often emerges when questions of ethical value are at stake. The facilitator-led, collaborative thinking helps pupils become more comfortable with the inherent vagueness and ambiguity at the heart of much of our ethical lives, which in turn better equips them to think in an open-minded and reflexive way about problems they are faced with.

As with the examples discussed throughout this briefing paper so far, then, RSE lessons on issues of ethical value can be fruitfully conducted using methods of philosophical inquiry and according to set of respectful, yet rigorous, standards. Deepening understanding of ethical issues can be achieved by drawing on the wealth of academic philosophical research on ethical and moral theory, much of which deals directly with the themes set out in the RSE curriculum. For example, an RSE lesson on cyberbullying could explore the harms of bullying using core philosophical concepts such as equal respect and human dignity, welfare, wellbeing, and fairness, where various different ‘conceptions’ of bullying are weighed up and compared before being ‘tested’ on hypothetical or actual example scenarios. This method of acquiring a deeper understanding of what cyberbullying actually *is* is necessary for demonstrating both how it differs from other sorts of behaviour as well as the kinds of responsibilities we have to step in and respond to it when it occurs. This deeper understanding serves to better equip children for dealing with such behaviour in the ‘real’ world, where situations are a lot more messy, ambiguous, and nuanced than ‘checklist’ prescriptive definitions of cyberbullying would have you believe.

#### iv.iv Flexibility and Wide Applicability

Finally, the inherent flexibility and wide applicability of PwC methods means that they can be adapted to suit novel and as-yet-unencountered topics and issues that tend to fall under the remit of RSE. PwC facilitation methods- once learned by teachers- can be employed to run philosophical inquiries with children and young people from Foundation-post-16 stage and beyond. They have also been proven to be a particularly beneficial pedagogical method for engaging with children and young people with special educational needs (SEN). Further, the flexibility of PwC methods mean that they have universal applicability across schools no matter their religious denomination, and in fact play a central role in enriching the ethos of a school by giving pupils the tools to be able to express their beliefs as members of a shared spiritual community.

At the same time, the non-directive nature of PwC methods means that questions of ethical value or debates surrounding essentially contested concepts can be effectively and confidently

explored by teachers free from the concern that they will accidentally endorse a prescriptive or moralising worldview. By engaging in collaborative dialogue about existing philosophical literature on a topic, contentious issues can be explored in a helpfully (more) impersonal and academic fashion and according to a clear set of disciplinary standards.

## V. Conclusion

This briefing paper has provided a short summary of some of the issues reported on existing RSE provision in NI and the recent debates and societal changes leading up to the launch of the present inquiry. In response, I have provided a sketch of how ‘Philosophy with Children’ (PwC) might be used to ground the delivery of PSE in NI. A philosophical framework is demonstrated to provide the structure and ‘toolkit’ necessary for the confident and academically effective delivery of teaching on RSE issues involving ‘essentially contested concepts’ and those concerning ethical values. Lessons structured according to PwC principles are both flexible and intellectually rigorous, allow for the inclusion of a diverse range of voices, and provide teachers with the skills needed to ensure progress and metacognition on core topics. Importantly, PwC methods secure the affective trust needed for successful discussion of contentious or sensitive issues, while also allowing opportunities for productive disagreement and conflict to remain.

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