



UTU RESPONSE TO THE STORMONT EDUCATION COMMITTEE MINI-INQUIRY ON RSE

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The Ulster Teachers' Union (UTU) proudly represents a community of around 6,000 dedicated educators throughout Northern Ireland, covering the Nursery, Primary, Post-Primary, and Special sectors.

UTU welcomes the opportunity to respond to this mini-inquiry. We have long been concerned that, amidst growing levels of unacceptable behaviour in our society, we continue to face obstacles and barriers in equipping our children and young people with the tools they need to make good choices and keep themselves safe from harm. Schools are not the solution to all societal ills, nor should they be seen as such. However, they have access to all children and young people and play a critical role in a society-wide strategy aimed at addressing the rising levels of harm we see on a daily basis.

RSE CURRICULUM

The UTU firmly believes that Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in schools is essential for cultivating healthy, respectful relationships among young people and serves as a cornerstone for their emotional and social development. By ensuring that RSE forms an integral part of school curricula, schools can equip students with invaluable skills to navigate the intricate landscape of social interactions. This education covers vital concepts such as consent, effective communication, and mutual respect—principles that empower young individuals to make informed and thoughtful choices in their lives. The UTU envisions a vibrant educational landscape where all students can flourish as compassionate and responsible citizens, actively engaging in a culture rooted in equality and respect.

When RSE was initially introduced to schools, individual institutions, in conjunction with parents, developed curricula that reflected the values and ethos of their own communities. Many schools have not revisited or reflected upon their decisions and the context in which they were set since that time. The life experiences of young people and the society in which they now seek development have also changed greatly. **There are key life lessons that should no longer be dictated by the decisions of a few.** Societal research and statistics have moved us beyond limiting such education and, in fact, make it even more incumbent on us to ensure that all children and young people receive the key messages and skills they need—and indeed deserve.

Recognizing RSE as a critical opportunity to educate and promote not only the immediate well-being of students but also their long-term success across various aspects of life, the union strongly advocates for meaningful reforms in RSE. We encourage the establishment of a comprehensive and inclusive curriculum that addresses the diverse needs of all students, with the goal of transforming schools into supportive and nurturing environments where every student feels empowered to excel not only academically but also socially.

By promoting holistic approaches to education and emphasizing the role of RSE, the UTU seeks to create a more inclusive atmosphere where understanding, empathy, and compassion are integral values. This commitment extends beyond the classroom, contributing to a safer and more informed future for everyone in Northern Ireland. The ultimate aim is to foster a vibrant community that prioritizes cooperation, respect, and mutual support, paving the way for a brighter tomorrow for all.

The Ulster Teachers' Union acknowledges the outstanding work being done in many schools regarding Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE). We commend the dedication of certain schools to delivering high-quality, comprehensive RSE lessons that significantly impact students' lives. However, we also recognize that some schools face numerous challenges in effectively implementing RSE. Several factors contribute to these difficulties, hindering their ability to teach this vital aspect of the curriculum as effectively as they should. Addressing these key issues is essential to ensure effective educational delivery.

RSE currently finds its home in the PDMU curriculum at the primary level and Learning for Life and Work at the post-primary level, with aspects being picked up across other curricular areas such as Science and RE. UTU believes that there is a risk that the content of RSE can be diluted through these structures and that defining a mandatory curriculum within a discrete format would raise the profile and weight of the learning.

The union acknowledges the recent mandate from the UK government requiring the inclusion of topics related to the prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion in the Northern Ireland curriculum for Key Stages 3 and 4 as part of RSE. These important subjects are already covered in the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (CCEA) syllabus for Science and Religious Education (RE) at these key stages for GCSE examinations. We strongly believe that these topics should be made compulsory within the RSE curriculum. When taught by trained and unbiased educators, RSE provides students with a safe and open forum for discussion, enabling them to engage critically and thoughtfully with these sensitive issues. This approach not only equips students with essential knowledge but also fosters an environment of understanding and respect, which is crucial for their personal development and well-being.

UTU firmly supports the vital recommendations presented by Lord Justice Gillen in his 2019 inquiry into serious sexual assault offences. We recognize the pressing need for these key issues—particularly those surrounding consent, appropriate behaviour, and the fostering of healthy relationships—to be thoroughly integrated into the RSE curriculum. By

embedding these recommendations into the curriculum, we can cultivate an educational environment that emphasizes the significance of consent and mutual respect, ultimately contributing to the creation of a safer, more informed society.

We would like to emphasize several key areas:

1. **Consent:** An understanding of consent is fundamental. Teaching students to recognize and respect mutual agreement in all interactions is vital. This education fosters a culture of respect and safety, empowering students to engage in ongoing, enthusiastic, and mutual consent in all aspects of their lives.

2. **Personal Space:** Educating students about personal space is crucial for instilling an understanding of physical boundaries. This awareness prevents uncomfortable or inappropriate interactions and promotes a safe environment among peers while helping students assert their own boundaries confidently.

3. **Boundaries:** Instruction on boundaries encompasses the recognition and respect of emotional, physical, and social limits within relationships. By grasping the importance of establishing and respecting boundaries, students can cultivate healthier interactions, reducing misunderstandings and conflicts.

4. **Appropriate Behaviour:** Equipping students with the social skills necessary for respectful and positive interactions is essential. This

includes understanding respectful communication, recognizing the impact of their actions on others, and effectively navigating complex social situations. Teaching appropriate behaviour is key in preventing harassment, bullying, and other forms of misconduct.

5. Civil Responsibility: Promoting civil responsibility is vital for fostering community engagement and active citizenship. Educating students about their roles and responsibilities as community members nurtures empathy and a commitment to the well-being of others, empowering them to contribute positively and take action against injustice.

Integrating these crucial topics into the RSE curriculum will ensure that all students receive a well-rounded education on building and maintaining respectful and consensual relationships. Additionally, it facilitates their development as responsible and engaged citizens. This education is not only essential for personal growth, but also for establishing a safe, inclusive, and proactive school environment. It is vital that all students possess the knowledge and skills required to lead respectful, fulfilling, and civically responsible lives.

The current absence of a mandatory, cohesive, and standardized RSE curriculum across schools presents a significant obstacle to effective education. Without consistent guidelines, the quality and depth of RSE can vary widely between schools and regions. This inconsistency not only results in some students receiving a thorough education about relationships, while others may be left with a fragmented understanding, but also contributes to a lack of uniformity in how essential subjects,

such as consent and healthy relationships, are approached. The variation in educational quality can lead to unequal access to vital information, leaving many young people unprepared to navigate the complexities of relationships and personal safety in their lives.

RSE POLICY

As a union, we firmly believe in the critical need for a cohesive and unified approach to Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) policy in schools across Northern Ireland. A standardized framework for RSE ensures consistency in delivering essential information and skills, equipping students with the knowledge necessary to make informed decisions about their relationships and personal well-being.

- Unified Approach and Stakeholder Involvement

The success of a unified RSE policy hinges on the active involvement and communication with all stakeholders, including educators, parents, guardians, and students. Keeping these groups informed and engaged is paramount, as their insights and support are invaluable in creating an effective and comprehensive RSE curriculum. Transparent and ongoing dialogue fosters trust and collaboration, ensuring that the policy reflects the diverse needs and values of our community.

- Flexibility for Local Adaptation

While a unified approach provides a solid foundation, it is equally important to allow schools the flexibility to tailor the RSE policy to their specific contexts. Schools vary widely in terms of social deprivation

levels, parental support, and other unique factors. Allowing for this adaptability ensures that the policy remains relevant and effective in addressing the particular challenges and opportunities each school faces.

As a union, the UTU feels a balanced combination of a unified policy framework with the flexibility for local adaptation will provide the most robust and responsive approach to RSE in Northern Ireland. This will not only enhance the educational experience but also ensure the well-being and preparedness of our students as they navigate their personal and social lives.

- Community Influences

In Northern Ireland, the approach to RSE is often influenced by the prevalent religious and moral beliefs in the community. Some teachers and schools may hesitate to address certain aspects of RSE, fearing this could conflict with these beliefs. This reluctance often arises from a desire to respect the values of parents and the wider community, leading to concerns that a comprehensive RSE program could challenge these moral frameworks.

As a result, discussions on important topics such as consent, diversity, and healthy relationships may be sidelined. This lack of engagement can leave students without crucial information and understanding, ultimately impacting their ability to make informed decisions. It highlights the need for a balanced approach—one that respects individual beliefs while

ensuring all students receive the education essential for their well-being and development.

- Parental Concerns and Misunderstandings

One of the primary challenges facing RSE is the apprehension voiced by many parents concerning certain topics covered in the curriculum. These concerns often stem from deeply rooted fears about their children's emotional and cognitive readiness to engage in discussions surrounding sensitive subjects like sexual health, consent, and relationships. Some parents worry that early exposure to such topics might lead to confusion or inappropriate behaviour. Consequently, without well-structured communication and proactive engagement strategies, schools find it difficult to convey the relevance and importance of RSE. This disconnect can weaken essential parental support, which is crucial for the successful implementation and acceptance of the RSE program within the school community.

- Terminology and Perception

It is the contention of UTU that the term 'sexuality' within the RSE title is the issue which appears to gain traction with interested parties, politicians, and the media. The debates and campaigns which stem from the resultant misinformation around issues which form a very small part of the curriculum can then lead to large and important topics being lost as a result, with schools and teachers often being vilified in the process.

One suggestion may be to marry up a more robust core mandatory curriculum with a change in headline; for example, in England, the primary curriculum is called Relationships and Health.

TEACHER RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

The UTU would like to express our appreciation for the valuable resources provided by CCEA and the RSE Hub. However, we believe that these resources alone are not sufficient. Many teachers face significant time constraints that prevent them from exploring, finding, and adapting these materials effectively. Additionally, there can be a lack of inclination to engage with these resources due to their demanding workloads. We encourage the creation of more accessible and user-friendly options to better support our educators.

EXTERNAL PROVIDERS

External providers play a significant role in delivering Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in schools across Northern Ireland. These organizations, such as Women's Aid, contribute specialized knowledge, training, and resources that enrich the RSE curriculum. They offer workshops, training sessions for teachers, and direct support for students, ensuring that the educational content is not only informative but also relevant to the diverse experiences of young people.

However, the quality of these external providers can vary significantly. Some organizations may have extensive experience and a strong track record in delivering comprehensive RSE, while others may lack the

necessary expertise or resources. This inconsistency can affect the overall effectiveness of the education students receive.

To ensure that all students benefit from high-quality RSE, schools must carefully select external providers and strive to establish consistent partnerships, allowing for a cohesive and comprehensive RSE program that meets the needs of all students. By collaborating with schools, agencies like Women's Aid not only provide support for teachers but also offer students a safe space to discuss their concerns and seek help, fostering an environment of trust and openness. This partnership not only enriches the educational experience but also empowers young people to develop healthy, respectful relationships, paving the way for a more supportive and informed society. By integrating the insights and resources of these agencies, schools can adopt a more comprehensive approach to RSE, ultimately promoting the well-being and safety of all students.

The UTU acknowledges that recent government cuts to funding for outside agencies that support schools in delivering RSE in Northern Ireland are deeply detrimental to our educational system. These agencies play a vital role in providing expertise, resources, and training that enhance the RSE curriculum, ensuring it meets the diverse needs of students. Without adequate support, schools lack the necessary tools to effectively teach critical topics. This gap in education can leave students unprepared to navigate complex social dynamics and relationships. Furthermore, the absence of these agencies diminishes the safety net available for vulnerable students who rely on these resources for

guidance and support. The knowledge and advocacy provided by organizations like Women's Aid are essential for fostering a safe and supportive environment for all students.

These funding cuts not only undermine the quality of RSE in schools but also jeopardize the well-being of our young people. It is essential for the government to reconsider its approach to supporting education in this critical area.

SCHOOL BUDGETS

It is increasingly concerning that many schools in Northern Ireland face significant financial constraints within their own school budgets that hinder their ability to implement vital RSE programs, such as PATHS. The lack of adequate funding not only limits the resources available for effective RSE initiatives but also impacts the overall well-being of students. Without proper support, schools struggle to provide comprehensive education that addresses the challenges young people face today.

We at UTU call on policymakers and stakeholders to prioritize funding for these crucial programs in the school budget. Investing in RSE is an investment in our children's future, equipping them with the knowledge and skills they need to navigate their relationships and make informed choices. It is vital that we ensure every school has the means to deliver high-quality education that addresses these fundamental aspects of student well-being.

SPECIAL EDUCATION

At UTU, we are acutely aware that addressing Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) with pupils who have Special Educational Needs (SEN) presents unique challenges for teachers, especially in special schools in Northern Ireland. The complexities of individual needs require a tailored approach, which often involves additional training, resources, and support.

Teachers must navigate varying levels of understanding and communication abilities among their students, making it essential to adapt lessons to ensure inclusivity and accessibility. This often necessitates specialized teaching methods and resources that may not always be readily available.

Furthermore, there is a significant emotional component involved. Pupils with SEN may have heightened vulnerabilities when it comes to relationships and personal safety. This makes it imperative for educators to create a safe and trusting environment where students feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics. Teachers must handle these discussions with sensitivity and care, which can be emotionally taxing.

The lack of sufficient funding and training for RSE in special schools exacerbates these challenges. Without adequate resources, teachers are left without the necessary tools to properly educate their students about relationships, consent, and personal safety, ultimately limiting the

effectiveness of the RSE curriculum. While RSE is crucial for all students, the unique challenges faced by teachers in special schools necessitate a more supportive framework that provides targeted training and resources. This will enable them to deliver RSE effectively, ensuring that all students, regardless of their needs, have the opportunity to learn about healthy relationships and personal safety.

MONITORING OF RSE

Ensuring the consistent delivery of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) across schools in Northern Ireland is not merely important; it is absolutely essential for the holistic development of students. To achieve this, it is imperative that all students, irrespective of the school they attend, receive an effective education that is accurate, age-appropriate, ability-appropriate, and relevant to them.

It is clear that RSE in schools across Northern Ireland is not monitored and evaluated consistently. Unlike key subjects such as numeracy, RSE does not receive the same level of scrutiny and standardization. Each school currently has its own method of monitoring RSE, which results in a fragmented approach and can lead to disparities in the quality and effectiveness of the education provided.

To address this issue, it is essential to adopt a consistent approach to the monitoring and evaluation of RSE. This consistency will ensure that all students receive a comprehensive and high-quality education, regardless of the school they attend. Establishing standardized

guidelines and procedures for monitoring RSE will help maintain uniformity and excellence across all schools.

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) plays an indispensable role in this endeavour by overseeing the implementation of RSE policies throughout the education system. It is vital that the ETI goes beyond merely monitoring the adherence to established standards; it must also consider the diverse and unique contexts in which different schools operate. By adopting a multifaceted approach to monitoring and evaluation, the ETI can ensure that while there is a necessary consistency in the delivery of RSE, schools are also granted the flexibility to tailor their RSE programs in ways that best meet the specific needs of their students. Striking this balance is crucial for fostering an inclusive and effective educational environment. Ultimately, such an environment will empower all students to thrive, equipping them with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate life in a positive and informed manner.

SOCIAL MEDIA

As social media and technology play an increasingly prominent role in the lives of young people, RSE programmes need to evolve in tandem with these changes. However, many schools have yet to incorporate crucial lessons on online safety, cyberbullying, and the effects of digital interactions on mental health within their RSE curricula. The absence of these lessons can leave students ill-equipped to manage the challenges and pressures they face in today's digital landscape. As issues like

online harassment and the impact of social media on self-esteem become more prevalent, schools must address these contemporary concerns to ensure that students are prepared to navigate their online lives safely and responsibly. Integrating discussions on digital safety into RSE can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the various aspects of relationships in the modern world.

OPT-OUT

In Northern Ireland, parents have the legal right to withdraw their children from elements of RSE classes. While this option is available, the consequences can be far-reaching and detrimental. Students who opt out of RSE miss crucial lessons covering emotional well-being, consent, healthy relationships, and safe practices regarding sexual health. This absence of education can lead to significant gaps in their understanding, leaving them ill-equipped to navigate complex social situations.

The UTU believes in the professional competence and judgement of teachers and their ability to appropriately deliver the curriculum, regardless of the age or capacity of the children and young people in their care. Therefore, we do not support the option to opt out; in fact, we see it as failing in our duty and responsibility to pupils.

COMBATING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

As a union, we are acutely aware that domestic abuse remains a critical and prevalent issue in Northern Ireland, with a staggering 33,071 domestic abuse incidents reported over the past year (2023). This alarming statistic underscores not only the prevalence of domestic violence but also the urgent need for comprehensive solutions and greater societal awareness.

Femicide stands out as one of the most tragic outcomes of domestic abuse and continues to be a significant concern within the region. Northern Ireland currently ranks as having the second highest femicide rate in Western Europe, with the latest figures from the PSNI showing that 31 women have been murdered in NI over the past five years, including a startling four within six weeks (October 2024). This distressing figure highlights the necessity for effective interventions, support systems, and a collective societal commitment to combating this issue.

One notable initiative aimed at addressing the impact of domestic abuse on the most vulnerable members of society—children—is Operation Encompass. This progressive scheme has made over 23,000 referrals since its inception in 2021 (as of May 2024), ensuring that schools are promptly informed about incidents of domestic abuse. This enables educational institutions to provide timely and appropriate support to affected children, helping to mitigate the long-term consequences of such traumatic experiences.

Recent media coverage has focused on various youth organizations, uncovering disturbing attitudes toward women, particularly among young men. Research shows that a significant number of young men display outright disrespect for girls, believing they have the right to do so without consequence. This behaviour can manifest in various ways, including derogatory comments, objectification, and dismissive attitudes.

Many girls in these communities often feel uncomfortable or uneasy about how they are treated, yet they may not label these experiences as abuse. This lack of recognition can stem from limited education about what constitutes healthy relationships and mutual respect. Furthermore, cultural norms may contribute to a significant gap in understanding, leaving young women without the knowledge or support to address these behaviours effectively.

Youth organizations face significant challenges in tackling the stigma associated with domestic abuse. It is crucial for these groups to actively confront and challenge the damaging attitudes and norms that contribute to domestic violence. Addressing these issues is essential for fostering a safer and more supportive environment both within these organizations and in the broader community.

As a society, we are currently failing to cultivate healthy, respectful relationships. The high prevalence of domestic abuse and femicide serves as a stark indicator of this failure. It is imperative that we collectively strive towards creating an environment in which healthy relationships are not just encouraged but are seen as the norm. Access

to support and intervention for victims must be readily available, ensuring that no one has to navigate the complex and difficult journey of healing alone.

IN SUMMARY

We at UTU believe there is an urgent and compelling need to establish a mandatory curriculum for Relationships and Sexual Education (RSE) in schools. This initiative is essential not only to address current educational gaps but also to ensure that all students receive comprehensive and accurate information regarding relationships and health. To make this curriculum effective, it is crucial to provide adequate funding. Financial resources will be necessary to develop materials, offer training, and support ongoing initiatives effectively.

In addition to funding, investing in comprehensive training programs for educators is vital. Teachers must be equipped with the skills and knowledge needed to confidently deliver RSE. This training should cover a wide range of topics—such as consent, healthy relationships, sexual health, and emotional well-being—enabling educators to approach sensitive subjects competently. It is also important that training includes a focus on developing age-appropriate content to ensure discussions are relevant to students' developmental stages.

To further enhance the effectiveness of RSE, support from external agencies should be sought. These agencies can provide valuable

resources, specialized training, and ongoing professional development opportunities for educators. Their involvement can offer expert guidance on best practices in RSE, ultimately fostering a safe and respectful learning environment where students feel comfortable discussing issues related to relationships and health/sexuality.

Proactive engagement with parents and guardians is critical. Building trust and understanding among families can provide essential support for RSE initiatives, ensuring that parents feel involved and informed about what their children are learning.

Effective standardized monitoring of RSE across all schools is necessary. Establishing a standardized policy for RSE will provide a framework that all schools can adopt and adapt to their specific contexts. This consistency will ensure that every student receives a quality education in relationships and sexual health. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) must play a significant role in this process by implementing standardized criteria for inspections to assess the effectiveness of RSE programs in schools. This oversight will help ensure that schools are systematically meeting educational requirements and maintaining high standards in delivering RSE.

To create an inclusive atmosphere, it is important that all teachers—regardless of their personal beliefs—are equipped and prepared to deliver this curriculum. This approach can mitigate potential biases and promote a broader understanding of diverse perspectives related to relationships and health/sexuality. Regular communication with parents,

including informational sessions and opportunities for feedback, can help bridge the gap between schools and families.

By focusing on collaboration and open dialogue between educators and families, the education system can work towards developing a more effective and inclusive RSE curriculum. Such an initiative will ultimately benefit all students in Northern Ireland, ensuring they leave school with a well-rounded understanding of relationships and health/sexuality—critical knowledge that will empower them throughout their lives.