

Report on Consultation with Comhairle na nÓg on Relationships and Sexuality Education



About Report Authors

The Child Law Clinic has extensive experience of consulting with government departments and community organisations, in particular in ensuring meaningful participation by children and young people in areas that are of interest and importance to them. The Child Law Clinic is led by Professor Ursula Kilkelly, an international children's rights scholar who has published widely on children's rights, and is staffed by academic and research support staff at the School of Law in UCC.

Background

In April 2018 the NCCA was tasked by the Minister for Education and Skills to review the Relationships and Sexuality (RSE) programme, which is part of Social, Personal, and Health Education (SPHE) in both primary and post-primary schools. As part of the overall process of review, the NCCA sought to hear the views of young people as to how RSE could be improved so that their ideas and suggestions could inform the advice to the Minister. The Comhairle na nÓg consultation event complemented the other strands of the review where the NCCA consulted with young people through school visits and an online questionnaire. The key questions discussed during the consultation related to the students' experiences of RSE to date; their opinions as to what constitutes good RSE and what the barriers to good RSE are; examples of good practice and suggestions of improvements that could be made.

The consultation was commissioned by the NCCA and conducted by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), and the Participation team from Youth Work Ireland. This reflects the commitment of the NCCA and the DCYA to student voice and the participation of children and young people in matters that affect them. This is now embedded in Irish policy, through the adoption of *Brighter Outcomes, Better Futures*, and the *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020*.

Methodology

The format of the consultation, the topics to be discussed and the questions to be asked were developed and agreed between DCYA and NCCA, as well as with a Youth Advisory Group (YAG) drawn from two Comhairle na nÓg groups (Westmeath and Cork County). The YAG conducted a preliminary consultation in order to test the initial questions and to suggest amendments as necessary in order to ensure that the most effective questions were asked of participants.

Consultation Approach

Seventy-seven young people took part in the consultation event representing Comhairle na nÓg groups from most counties in Ireland with the exception of Wicklow and Leitrim. In addition, six members of the Youth Advisory Group representing Cork County and Westmeath Comhairlí na nÓg were in attendance. The consultation took place in two groups, with one session in the morning and another in the afternoon. The process and key messages from the day are summarised in this report.

Consultation Activities

The consultation began with ice-breaker activities aimed at helping participants to get to know each other and feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences with the wider group. The ice-breaker sessions also served to arrange the participants in order of age so that those aged between 12-15 and 16-18 could be grouped together. This helped ensure that the topics discussed in groups during the consultation activities would generally be at a similar level of experience and knowledge.

Graffiti Wall

Throughout the consultation, participants were invited to share their thoughts on a large poster bearing two headings. Two suggestion boxes were also available to facilitate anyone who felt uncomfortable writing openly on the wall. The headings on the wall and on the suggestion boxes were, *what helps good RSE?* and *what are the barriers to good RSE?* Participants were asked to write, in their own time, their own answers to those questions.

Lifelines

The first part of the consultation saw the participants broken into four groups. Each participant was given an individual *lifeline* sheet and was asked to brainstorm their personal experience of RSE to date, both in and out of school. This was to include anything they may have learned in school, at home, among peers or from the internet. Each participant initially worked alone followed by a short discussion with others in their group. Finally, the entire group had a brief conversation about the various responses shared.

Open Space

The second part of the consultation involved an *open space* activity. Participants were provided with post-it notes and asked to complete the following statements, *good RSE to me is* and *poor RSE to me is*. All of the filled post-it notes were attached to the wall under different headings. The categories identified were:

- Teaching
- Information, content and consent
- Safe space for RSE
- Inclusivity

World Café

The third part of the consultation involved each of these categories being assigned to four tables. Each category was explored through three questions or statements:

- Tell us more about this
- Give examples of where this is working well (inside & outside school)
- How could this be improved?

Graffiti Wall

The Graffiti wall allowed participants to share their thoughts on a large poster bearing two headings. Two suggestion boxes were also available to facilitate anyone who felt uncomfortable writing openly on the Wall. The headings on the wall and on the suggestion boxes were what helps good RSE? and what are the barriers to good RSE?

Under the 'what helps good RSE?' heading the key messages were:

- Avoiding bias and personal opinions
- Having teachers who are comfortable with teaching the subject, who are appropriately trained, trustworthy and well-informed and following a curriculum that addresses the needs of the entire community (*straight and LGBTQI+*) were among the key messages gleaned.

Under the 'barriers to good RSE' heading, the key messages were:

- Poorly trained and/or uncomfortable teachers
- Religious bias within the curriculum
- Not being provided with enough or sufficiently detailed information.

What helps good RSE?



What are the barriers to good RSE?



Lifelines

The lifelines exercise saw all of the participants recording and discussing their experiences of RSE. The following recounts the written comments on the lifelines sheet as well as conversations between participants based on their sheets



RSE in School

Most young people responded that their experiences of RSE in school were unsatisfactory with few positive experiences reported. When reflecting on primary school several young people remembered being given a talk in 6th class which occasionally involved using a DVD resource called Busy Bodies where videos about puberty and contraception were played. One young person noted that *there was no talk of anything until the last week of 6th class and we warned not to tell any other students*. Young people noted that RSE in secondary school overly focused on the scientific aspects through biology or science class. One young person shared that *in secondary we were only told what happened in sex and why to prevent pregnancy and no RSE for LGBT people*. Other young people reported that they experienced little to no RSE in the junior cycle of post-primary school, with the following example of comments reflective of all groups: *younger years in secondary school don't get enough education; when I was in 1st, 2nd, 3rd year, I heard nothing, it was only when I went into 5th and 6th year when I got more information and we had 6 weeks of RSE class during religion in 6th year*.

RSE from Peers

Young people spoke about peers as a source of RSE without clarifying what they learned or in what contexts this learning arose. Young people reported both positive engagement and reluctance to engage with peers. On the positive side, young people reported comments like: *your friends teach you more than school*. While the reluctance to engage related to embarrassment of talking to friends with young people reporting *if I didn't understand something I would look it up online and I was too scared to ask my friends*. Other young people commented that the form conversations took around RSE were usually based on rumour. For example young people said these conversations usually started with *I heard this...* with young people sharing that you couldn't be sure what was fact, fiction or a joke.

RSE from family

Responses from young people on their views of learning about RSE from family were mixed. Some young people reported *the birds and bees talk* or noted that they had experience generally (but without giving detail) of learning about RSE from parents, siblings, or their extended family. Among the comments noted were: *my parents covered the majority of RSE; my parents were very open with my questions but when it came to modern stuff they didn't know*. However, others had less engagement with parents with one young person commenting *I tried to ask my parents and they became very squeamish and didn't want to talk about it*.

RSE online

Young people also spoke about their experience of RSE online, including social media platforms. Young people demonstrated wariness of the online space as resource, with one person writing that there was *a lot of misleading info online so when I did research, I had to check different websites to check it's right*. Another cautioned *the internet can be a good source - however, it may be unsafe/inappropriate for younger children*. Some young people were quite specific about what information they accessed online and where they accessed it with comments written on lifeline sheets such as: *random articles and YouTube videos taught me about consent and basic LGBTQI+ , general info about LGBT matters; the internet (LGBT got mentioned in school and I was curious so I googled it)*. Some young people saw the internet as a positive resource when the other ways to learn about RSE had let them down, with one young person writing *that the internet is better than teachers to educate about consent, rape culture etc*. while others recognised the benefits of the immediacy of the resource because the ease of access to information they needed saying *you can easily access whatever information you need to know*.

Open Space

The open space exercise saw all of the participants contributing their opinions as to what constitutes good and poor RSE. The young people were asked to use post-it notes to complete the phrases good RSE to me is and poor RSE to me is... The open space post-it note exercise generated the following comments that represent a range of views that young people expressed.

Teaching RSE, how it's taught and classroom atmosphere

Good RSE is...	Poor RSE is...
<p><i>having students being more informed by the end of the course</i></p> <p><i>Learn it from maybe 1st year, not in 5th or 6th year</i></p> <p><i>Teachers actually know what they are talking about</i></p> <p><i>Delivered with confidence and learned with maturity</i></p>	<p><i>When the teacher doesn't know what they are teaching/are not informed</i></p> <p><i>Not learning it at all because the teacher is awkward</i></p> <p><i>When someone comes out more confused than they went in</i></p> <p><i>Poor communication - not allowing questions or discussions by students</i></p>

The current curriculum, the content including consent

Good RSE is....	Poor RSE is...
<p><i>Teaching about STIs, contraception/risks of unprotected sex/sexual health covers all aspects/doesn't skim</i></p> <p><i>Teaching about relationships</i></p> <p><i>Learning about consent and protecting yourself in school</i></p>	<p><i>Brushing over the topic and not going into enough depth</i></p> <p><i>When teachers refuse to inform students [about] the importance of contraception, consent and the appropriate use of social media regarding RSE</i></p> <p><i>Not expanding on more info as the years go up</i></p>

A Safe Space

Good RSE is...	Poor RSE is...
<p><i>Confident teachers/teachers & students cooperating, not messing</i></p> <p><i>Being able to ask questions/get everyone's opinion/allowing students to voice their opinions</i></p> <p><i>Makes us more mature for life and future tasks</i></p>	<p><i>...makes it a joke/laugh</i></p> <p><i>does not regard adolescent views, and disregards their responsibility as sexual beings</i></p>

Inclusive RSE including LGBT matters

Good RSE is...	Poor RSE is...
<p><i>Inclusive of LGBT community and all people</i></p> <p><i>Informs adolescents on LGBTQ+ matters but also respecting religious views and how to develop positive, safe relationships</i></p> <p><i>Inclusive for everyone of all genders, sexualities</i></p>	<p><i>Dismissive of LGBT relationships</i></p> <p><i>Doesn't include disabled people</i></p> <p><i>Teacher lets the kids laugh at LGBTQ issues when talking/teaching it, focussing only on heterosexual education</i></p> <p><i>Biased by religious or personal opinions</i></p>

World Café

Based on the results of the open space exercise, the world café themes were identified and each group proceeded to discuss these in more detail. The themes were refined and emerged as teaching and learning, content and environment, safe space, and inclusivity/ LGBT issues.

The statements and questions posed relating to each theme were:

- Tell us more about this
- Give examples of where this works well
- How could this be improved

The following are the key messages that emerged from notes written from a range of groups as well as the conversations from a range of groups. At some points key messages or statements were put to a vote from the whole group. The results of which are also illustrated through the following section.



Teaching and Learning

Tell me more about this...

Some teachers could carry over biases and attitudes towards different sexualities

Even if teachers/school are good, if home is uncomfortable, it's pointless

Teacher are either awkward or the opposite and just joking

In primary boys were separated from the girls and only told about their gender

My teacher uses terms like 'hoo-hah' and mumbles instead of proper terms

By teaching and treating those topics as embarrassing, it reinforces that those topics should be embarrassing

RSE is non-existent in secondary school. Only through Home Ec and biology, which is factual and emotionless

Examples of where this is working well

The key messages young people noted and reported were:

- teachers need to be comfortable and confident with the subject
- teachers need to be as well-informed as possible
- teachers need to be aware that how they approach the subject massively impacts on how students perceive it.

During aspects where votes were taken from the whole group, 54% supported the statement *If a teacher speaks about RSE as a natural topic, the students will feel much more comfortable and feel more free about talking about it and a comfortable teacher can make big impact on how it's taught - if they are open and will answer a question thoroughly for you, you would feel more confident talking to peers and teachers.* Other messages that emerged from young people included comments like *some teachers, often younger, are quite inclusive and do discuss LGBTQ relationships but not commonly and very well with the actual scientific aspect of sex.* . Positivity was expressed about the practice in some schools of providing anonymous question boxes to students, enabling them to ask the questions they want answered without having to do so in front of peers. This appears have been a particularly popular approach experienced by young people in primary school

How can this be improved?

Improving training for teachers and introducing specialised teachers were the most widely supported ideas for improvement. The importance of RSE in the curriculum should not be underestimated and the time dedicated to its delivery should not be treated as a *free class*. RSE that is taught fully and comprehensively, where teachers are not allowed to pick and choose, was supported by the majority of young people. Such suggestions included comments like *set a curriculum that must be followed so students are all informed equally and correctly and standardised curriculum, free from biased teacher views; teachers choosing what to teach/everyone learn the same thing at the same age.* Another popular suggestion related to opportunities for some practical experience needed in RSE with comments like *teachers tell us what to do with condoms and why they're important but don't actually show us how to put them on. I'm in 5th year and I honestly wouldn't have an idea about how to put one on correctly e.g. Use a banana/cucumber.*

Content and Environment

Tell me more about this...

A lot of content not realistic/relatable

Topics brushed over in science and not even covered in RSE

Get taught about it too late

In my school we didn't really talk about consent - we know it's wrong but we weren't taught

Very little info given in primary school talk - just puberty (not covered well) and reproduction

consent and relationships are never spoken about

Consent, toxic relationships and well-being not being spoken about

Examples of where this is working well

RSE taught by adults other than teachers, whether in school or in other locations such as youth clubs was cited regularly as examples of where young people are experiencing positive engagement with the subject. Guest speakers from experienced organisations helped young people to feel comfortable talking about RSE and discussed topics knowledgeably, enhancing the information they may have already had. Schools where teachers are well trained and engage openly and honestly with the subject were also acknowledged. One young person spoke favourably of a six week course that they had experienced in 6th year reporting that *a 6 week block in 6th year was very successful as teacher was trained in RSE. She was very comfortable and encouraged students to discuss topics; very casual like a chat and made it easier to talk about.* Along with schools, internet resources were referred to positively as a source of information. This was sometimes to address the gaps from RSE teaching at school and home.

How can this be improved?

Almost one quarter of the votes cast on the answers to how aspects of RSE can be improved related to calls for comprehensive education on consent. It is perhaps best expressed by one young person who stated *we need to go into more detail about consent. It can be given verbally and isn't given if someone is drunk or high; need to talk about scenarios/laws.* The use of role play and scenarios to teach about consent was repeatedly suggested. Consent being addressed in school at an early age was also supported by those voting, as were suggestions that RSE be a regular fixture on the school timetable. Improved information and education on other RSE content was also discussed. This included calls for *more information on contraception, STIs, and protection* and that *all topics should be covered no matter what teacher thinks and program created to ensure that all info needed is delivered to students.* One person succinctly noted that those teaching RSE should *talk about consent; LGBT+ people; crisis pregnancy; STIs; LGBT sex; sexual assault; resources; Rape Crisis Centre; Hygiene around sex.*

A Safe Space

Tell me more about this...

Somewhere you can talk about RSE and not worry about being judged

Where everyone respects and values the other's opinions

Teachers not trained on how to teach and this makes both teachers and students uncomfortable

Youth services gave talk that was really informative on RSE and all aspects of the topic

There's a lot of stigma around sex education

Should be open - not afraid to ask questions; students encouraged to engage with each other and teachers

In an ideal world safe space should be (but isn't) an open & accepting environment. All opinions and questions valid

Boys and girls shouldn't be separated

Examples of where this is working well

Over one third of the votes cast on this question on a safe space to learn about RSE related to the confidence of teachers and their comfort with the teaching RSE. Statements that received favourable responses from groups included that the *person teaching should be confident and not keep things quiet which makes others feel it shouldn't be talked about*, and *having a teacher that is comfortable makes everyone comfortable and just talking about LGBT casually and not making a big deal about it*. Individual teachers and examples of specific good experiences were also highlighted for special mention. The idea of introducing external facilitators instead of in-school teachers was raised on a number of occasions and found favour by many including those who already had positive experiences with them. The greatest number of votes suggested that students should be consulted as to whether they would prefer internal or external facilitators and further votes were then cast in favour of engaging external speakers. Positive experiences in fora outside the school gate provided good examples of a safe space for learning in RSE for almost one fifth of votes. Youth groups were mentioned consistently across all groups, from individual groups that meet to support LGBTQI+ young people to general youth clubs and Comhairle na nÓg, were highlighted as places where young people were happy to discuss RSE.

How can this be improved?

Removing the taboos around sexuality education and RSE were popular suggestions with the proposal that the *talk* that is traditionally experienced by young people be eliminated in favour of regular classes. Comments made about the infrequent nature of the experience such as *it creates a culture of awkwardness and builds up an uncomfortable atmosphere leading people not to take it seriously and laughing during the talk. It needs to be a regular class to stop this* were heard often. Teachers and teacher training in how to effectively teach RSE were also highlighted as areas for potential improvement, with a combined 27% of the votes cast for suggestions under these

headings. In the alternative, young people suggested that outside organisations be brought in to deliver RSE which would potentially remove uncomfortable engagement for both teachers and students. Other votes were cast for suggestions such as *let students know if they need help they can ask for it. If they are not comfortable with SPHE teachers, to go to parents, counsellor, other teachers, family members and help integrate LGBT+ community sexual activity and straight community sexual activity to normalise .*

Inclusivity/LGBTQI+

Tell me more about this...

*Teachers don't know about LGBTQI+ issues and they laugh about it
A lot of teachers are uncomfortable talking about these things but it shouldn't be about what they're comfortable with, it's about what the students need to know
STIs/STDs in same-sex relationships are never brought up/discussed
Need to promote respect of sexualities, other people's views/opinions, even if you disagree
nothing about the disabled
In my school it's inclusive, includes LGBT, mental health etc.
Everyone involved in RSE should feel included and that their opinions and questions are valid*

Examples of where this is working well

Two broad examples stood out when participants were asked to reflect on positive experience of inclusivity in RSE. Youth groups and organisations providing RSE to young people through guest lectures at school were highlighted as the best examples. One person recounted that a *speaker from Youth Health Services came to our school and explained their services and really went into things that we'd never hear about from teachers* and another noted that *youth groups are very inclusive and they have groups such as Chill Out*. Overall 28% of young people reported positive experiences of inclusivity in youth organisations. This was matched by recognition for teachers who *don't make a big deal* of LGBTI+ issues in school and who talk casually about such matters and schools that deliver a good relationship talk. Additional specific examples of where inclusivity is working well include the report that *People came to our workshop to talk about people with disability and talk held with 2nd year about LGBTQ+ because there were parents who felt they needed to be educated due to a transgender person in their year*.

How can this be improved?

Removing the bias in favour of heterosexual relationships is the suggestion that gained the most support with young people calling primarily for the inclusion to LGBTQI+ issues in the RSE curriculum and for discussion around these topics to be normalised. This can be achieved by *teachers being trained in LGBTQI+ issues and disability issues in RSE* and promoting an open-minded approach to RSE. Taking time to fully engage with the concept of inclusivity also attracted 9% of votes. One

suggestion was that *It should be more casual and done over a couple of months so people can get the most information possible.* This would enable thoughtful engagement with matters such as this one: *I have no idea if transgender people need to use contraception or not and I think this should be included in RSE talks because people being trans is pretty common nowadays.* Suggestions that external speakers and facilitators be engaged was low but statements in their favour included *get in an external speaker to talk about sex ed between heterosexual and homosexual because the teacher could be biased and disagree with homosexual relationships, making people who are homosexual feel isolated and have people trained to deliver RSE, not to be placed on teachers, they are not the ones who should have to teach this.* While inclusivity focussed mainly on matters related to the LGBTQI+ community, 5% of votes about improvements were cast for the following statement: *more places for disabled people as well as LGBTQ for them to know they're respected and accepted.*

Conclusion

Over the course of the entire process concluding in consultation event, including the planning meetings, it is quite clear that young people have very definite ideas on the shortcomings of the RSE curriculum and on how they believe that these shortcomings can be addressed. The volume of information gathered from the young people who took part in the two consultation sessions reflects the wide variety of factors that need to be considered in the development of a new RSE curriculum. It would appear that RSE is currently delivered in a variety of ways, with varying degrees of success and in general, it is evident that young people are not satisfied with the RSE education that they are receiving. Their suggestions for improvement are based on their perceptions that RSE does not meet their needs or provide the experience that they would like to have within the school system. Considering all of the information gathered from the consultations, the key messages are:

Teachers are central to a positive RSE experience. Teachers who are comfortable, approachable and open to questions are key to successful delivery of RSE. Teachers should be confident, should be well-trained and should be specially trained.

RSE as a school subject should be treated in the same way as other core curriculum subjects. It should be regularly scheduled – both across the primary and post-primary school system and across the school week. RSE should not be treated as an afterthought, should be properly resourced and given adequate time.

Young people clearly indicated throughout the consultation process that they would like access to an RSE curriculum that is not dependent on local factors such as availability or willingness of teachers. They would like to know that all young people are being given the same information at the same stage throughout their school life, information that is relevant and appropriate for that stage.

Schools can learn from the example of existing youth groups and organisations and, if necessary, should consider the possibility of working with such groups in order to deliver high quality RSE.

