

2017-05-17

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Recommended Citation

Nohilly, Margaret and Farrelly, Gerard (2017) "Sexuality in the context of Relationships and Sexuality Education," *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies*: Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 5.

doi:10.21427/D7GH8R

Available at: <https://arrow.dit.ie/ijass/vol17/iss1/5>

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Vol. 17(1), 2017, 48-58.

Abstract

This paper outlines a review of the teaching of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Irish primary schools since its inception in 1996 to the present day and provides some insight into current teaching in the area and potential challenges facing schools. It calls for the teaching of RSE as part of the wider context of Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE), to include teaching children from the earliest age possible that there are different types of sexual relationships, including homosexuality. Findings from a research study completed by Farrelly (2014) indicates that there is a reluctance amongst school leaders to allow for teaching children about sexual orientation and the reasons for this are explored.

Key words: Relationships and sexuality education, challenges, homosexuality, reluctance.

Introduction

This paper outlines a review of the teaching of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Irish primary schools since its inception in 1996 to the present day and provides some insight into current teaching in the area and potential challenges facing schools. It calls for the teaching of RSE as part of the wider context of SPHE, to include teaching children from the earliest age possible that there are different types of sexual relationships, including homosexuality. Research evidence from an original Irish study investigating school leader's attitudes towards and experience of dealing with homophobic bullying in the primary school (Farrelly, 2014) indicates that there is a reluctance amongst school leaders to allow for teaching children about sexual orientation. There are a wide range of different reasons for this, including school ethos, parental disapproval and the fact that children are perceived to be too young to understand. However, as this paper argues, if children can understand heterosexual relationships and that this is normative, then they can also understand that there are different types of relationship which are of equal value and worth. Research evidence gathered from young LGBT people living here in Ireland indicates just how traumatic and difficult young LGBT people can find their lives through a lack of acceptance from others (Minton, Dahl, O'Moore & Tuck, 2008). The recent marriage referendum in Ireland has the potential to be transformative in changing people's attitudes towards LGBTQI relationships and people and accepting them as part of the norm. However, this requires the same transformation at school level through comprehensive teaching of the RSE curriculum.

Throughout this paper reference is made to the voice of 283 school leaders who participated in the aforementioned study by Farrelly (2014). A questionnaire was distributed to the school leaders via a link facilitated by the Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) website. Although

this was a quantitative study, school leaders were invited to make comments on a variety of aspects of school policy and practice relating primarily to homophobic bullying, but also of the implementation and contents of individual school RSE policies. These voices reflect the reluctance on the part of a number of those who participated in the study, to extend what they perceive to be prescribed by the current curriculum and highlight the need for this area to explicitly outline what should be taught at each class level.

After the Irish referendum, and in the context of a historical sea change from a traditional conservative societal viewpoint to a more neo-liberal, secular attitude in relation to sex and sexuality, it is now timely to consider teaching children from a very early age about sexual orientation and in so doing acknowledging publicly that all forms of relationships are of equal value and worth. Through a school context that allows for discussion in challenging stereotypes and homophobic behaviours, it is possible to help normalise different sexualities and generate acceptance of those relationships for children. A growing number of schools in Ireland find themselves in the position whereby same sex couples are enrolling their own children and it is incumbent upon these schools to foster an ethos which is welcoming and accepting of difference. An update of the Department of Education RSE guidelines within the wider context of the SPHE curriculum in primary schools is required to direct schools both formally and informally in delivering this curriculum comprehensively to children.

Defining and Understanding RSE

RSE is an integral part of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), one of the subjects of the Primary School Curriculum. While the current curriculum for primary schools was revised in 1999, RSE guidelines were first published in 1996. The 1996 guidelines outline that RSE “*provides structured opportunities for pupils to acquire knowledge and understanding of human sexuality and relationships through processes which will enable them to form values and establish behaviours within a moral, spiritual and social framework (Government of Ireland, 1996, P5)*”. While the guidelines have not been updated since 1996, our understanding of human sexuality has evolved considerably in the intervening time, and most recently with the aforementioned legalisation of same-sex marriage in Ireland raises many questions for schools and teachers in relation to the teaching of RSE.

Rewind the Clock: The Need to Implement RSE

In 1995, A Report of the Expert Advisory Group on Relationships and Sexuality Education outlined the need for the implementation of guidelines in schools. The report outlined that research in both the Irish context and abroad indicated that parents welcomed the support of schools in helping them to fulfil their obligations with regards to RSE. Indeed, parents felt that education both within the family and in school had often been “inadequate” (Government of Ireland, 1995). In addition to parental support, support from church bodies and educational groups and bodies stated the need for a formal RSE programme from primary right through to second level education. The report also considered “aspects of contemporary life” which highlighted the need for an RSE policy in schools. In 1995, among this list were included: the changing role of men and women in society, children becoming more aware of different “sexual mores” and cross cultural influences and pressures on family life (Government of Ireland, 1995). In providing a rationale for the development of guidelines, human sexuality was considered: “Sexuality is an integral part of the human personality and has biological, psychological, cultural, social and spiritual dimensions (Government of Ireland, 1995, p6)”.

The report outlined that a holistic understanding of sexuality would contribute to wellbeing and enhanced personal relationships, with implications for the family and ultimately for society. Taking into consideration that RSE is a “lifelong” process, now twenty years later, should we ask ourselves do we need to redefine sexuality within the primary school curriculum?

The Development of RSE Guidelines for Primary Schools

The 1995 report on RSE provided a framework for the development of RSE in schools, including the development of a school policy. Following on from this in 1996, the guidelines for Primary schools from Infants to Sixth class were prepared by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). An overview of the RSE programme highlights its capacity to support children learning about themselves as sexual human beings, incorporating spiritual, social, emotional and physical growth and exploring attitudes, values, beliefs and opinions that relate to themselves and their development and their interaction with others (Government of Ireland, 1996). The guidelines also outline the importance of teaching RSE within the broader context of SPHE. The development of content for RSE was presented according to a number of strands and strand units, which correspond to the strands and strand units of the SPHE curriculum, published since 1999.

The overall content of RSE encompasses much more than the teaching of the sexually sensitive issues at each class level and takes account of pupil’s self-esteem and self-confidence, feelings and emotions, decision making and also of the major relationships within children’s lives- those within the family, within friendships and within groups, all of which is supported through the implementation of the strands and strand units of the SPHE Curriculum. The RSE guidelines also outline that the “emotional” and “intellectual” maturity of children must be considered when implementing the programme and recommends that “a degree of flexibility” is advisable for schools, but taking such factors into consideration; “it is envisaged that all of these sensitive issues will be dealt with before the end of a child’s primary schooling (NCCA, 1996, p.13)”. The guidelines outline the content from Infants to Sixth class, which reflects learning within a spiral curriculum where leaning is reinforced and extended at each class level.

The “sexually sensitive” issues in particular, as they are often referred to in the Irish primary school, cover naming the body parts at Infant level using the appropriate anatomical terms, and developing an awareness of human birth, whilst at first and second class level, children name the parts of the male and female body but also identify some of the functions of the body and come to appreciate what is necessary in order to provide and care for new born babies in both the animal and the human world. At third and fourth class level, children begin to develop awareness that physical changes take place in both the male and female body during growth to adulthood, while in the context of birth and new life they sequence and discuss the stages of development of the human baby from conception to birth. Finally, at fifth and sixth class pupils identify and explore the physical changes that occur in the male and female body with the onset of puberty, become familiar with the reproductive system of both male and female and understand how sexual intercourse, conception and birth taken place within the context of a committed, loving relationship. Pupils also have an opportunity to discuss and understand the responsibilities involved in being a parent.

Implementation of the above curriculum content is endorsed by the comments of the school leaders who participated in the study by Farrelly (2014). For example, as one school principal commented “we only teach RSE from the SPHE curriculum” highlights the fact that teachers follow a prescriptive programme in addressing the topic at class levels across the school. It is noteworthy that issues pertaining to other forms of sexuality such as homosexuality and other

sexualities are not explicitly referenced within the RSE and SPHE curriculum objectives. This paper argues that they in fact should be, as otherwise schools can validate an argument whereby they can be ignored, thereby perpetuating silence around homophobia as highlighted by Shai (2011).

The implementation and effectiveness of an RSE programme is dependent on a “partnership” approach, particularly between Parents and the school but also with collaboration from the Board of Management. Considering that a child’s “first experience of love, of intimacy and of relationship takes place in the family (Government of Ireland, 1996, p49)”, the influence of parents and of the home on all aspects of a child’s life but particular in the domain of RSE will be very significant and the guidelines work from the perspective that RSE is a shared responsibility between school and home.

Participants in the study by Farrelly (2014) questioned the shared responsibility of RSE between the school and home, particularly in relation to addressing the topic of homosexuality.

“The issue is not considered to be age appropriate for primary school children; we speak about loving relationships in RSE but are not gender specific. Questions which may arise regarding gay/lesbian relationships are referred back to parents”

“Roman Catholic school! Also [I] feel it’s too complex a subject matter for school [and it] should be between child and parent.”

The above quotes highlight the reluctance of schools to deviate from the specific curriculum content and that teaching RSE is based on the presumption of heterosexuality.

A framework for the development of a school policy on RSE is outlined in the guidelines. Indeed, the Report from the Expert Advisory Groups on Relationships and Sexuality Education in 1995 outlined that that policy should reflect the “core values” and “ethos” of the school and that policy development should include the formulation of a committee to facilitate conversation across the partners for the development of policy. The committee might include teachers, parents and management and consult students as appropriate (Government of Ireland, 1995). The 1995 Report also considered that provisions should be made for Parents who “hold conscientious or moral objections to the inclusion of Relationships and Sexuality Education on the school curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1995, p19)”. The policy framework takes account of the management and organisation of the programme within the school, including its delivery and procedures for review and evaluation. In 1997, a set of Policy Guidelines were also made available by the Department of Education to support the development of the school policy. These guidelines expanded on the 1995 Report and RSE Guidelines of 1996 in terms of the headings to include in the Policy and specific information that should be considered and schools have developed their policies following this guidance provided.

To underline this notion of RSE policy reflecting core values and ethos of a school, a number of participants in the study by Farrelly (2014) referred to school ethos. For example:

“there is also the issue of Patronage. The Catholic Church teaches that homosexuality is a sin so how can we then say to pupils that homosexuality is fine. I don’t have an issue doing it personally, but it does present an ethos problem.”

“ethos of the school-catholic”

In relation to policy, reference was also made to the fact that teaching in relation to sexual orientation would not be addressed. For example:

“probably felt it was more of a secondary school issue- i.e that our boys were too young to have ‘sexual orientation’ raised as an issue in a primary school written policy”

“much to my disappointment, the committee who oversaw the review of the RSE policy felt strongly that any reference to sexual orientation was not appropriate for a primary school”

The above comments display the complexities associated with implementing RSE policies in school and highlight that teaching in this area extends way beyond the mere implementation of curriculum content.

The Implementation of the Current RSE Curriculum in the Primary School

Schools have a legal responsibility under Section 9 (e) of the Education Act 1998 to “promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students (Government of Ireland, 1998, p 13)” and this must be provided in consultation with parents and with regard for the characteristic spirit of the school. Section 30 (2) (e) of the Act must also be considered as it takes account of the wishes of parents and outlines that a child may not attend instruction in a subject which is in conflict with the “conscience” of the Parent. While the Education Act outlines the responsibilities of schools to implement RSE in the context of SPHE, and with regard to parents, two reports published by the NCCA and the Inspectorate Evaluation Studies provide us with some insight into the implementation of SPHE and specifically RSE in the primary school.

In 2008, the NCCA published its Report on Phase Two of the Primary Curriculum Review which investigated the implementation of Gaelige, Science and SPHE. 1, 369 Teachers completed a questionnaire while Principals, Teachers, Parents and Children in eight schools shared their experiences through individual and group interviews (NCCA, 2008). In relation to SPHE, the questionnaire developed key lines of inquiry in relation to strands, strand units and methodologies. One of the questions explored how often teachers provided opportunities for pupils to foster personal development, health and wellbeing. While the vast majority of respondents in the questionnaire (97%) indicated that they provided opportunities for children “frequently” or “sometimes” for children to examine their diet and nutrition through SPHE lessons, by comparison only 71% of respondents noted that they allowed similar opportunities for children to come to understand sexuality and the processes of growth, development and reproduction (NCCA, 2008).

The teachers were further asked, what their greatest challenge was in teaching the Strand “Myself,” and 54% of teachers answered this question. The main areas the respondents recorded as presenting challenges included the sensitive nature of some of the material; time; class size, perceived curriculum overload and the children’s backgrounds (familial, societal, cultural). A figure of 28% of the overall 54% who responded noted that the “sensitive nature of some of the material” was the greatest challenge. Some teachers did note however, that they felt unprepared to teach the strand while others mentioned their own “inhibitions” when teaching sensitive material. The short amount of time allocated to SPHE on the weekly timetable impacted on the material covered with classes and respondents indicated that SPHE was often integrated with other subjects and not taught on its own.

In spite of the fact that there are opportunities to integrate SPHE with other subject areas, the sensitive issues in RSE need to be taught as a discrete unit of work to ensure the specific content

objectives are addressed. Teachers were also questioned in relation to how helpful they found various programmes when selecting content for SPHE lessons. Of the three Department of Education and Skills approved SPHE resources; Stay Safe (Child Abuse Prevention Programme, 1999), Walk Tall (Substance Misuse Prevention Programme, 1999) and Relationships and Sexuality Education (Government of Ireland, 1999) materials, the RSE programme was not rated as favourably as Stay Safe or Walk Tall. While 89% of respondents found the Stay Safe programme 'helpful' or 'very helpful' and 88% of respondents found the Walk Tall programme 'helpful' or 'very helpful', only 78% of respondents highlighted that the RSE programme was 'helpful' or 'very helpful'. This discrepancy in the research findings may reflect the possibility that the use of the resources provided to schools to specifically teach RSE are sometimes overlooked in favour of the other resources which are perceived to teach less sensitive content.

In 2009, the Department of Education Inspectorate published a report on the findings of a thematic evaluation of SPHE in forty primary schools. The evaluations, carried out in 2007, included observation of teaching and learning in SPHE, interviews with teachers, school management and pupils and examination of relevant school documentation and pupils' work (Department of Education and Science, 2009). One of the specific objectives of the evaluation was to review the effectiveness of the delivery of RSE in national schools. The report outlined the findings in relation to whole school planning for RSE. In the majority of schools, whole school planning for RSE was of a 'competent' standard, with very good evidence of planning in place in 10% of the schools. The collaborative involvement of teachers, management and parents in the planning and implementation of the policy and the ability of the policy to inform practice at individual class level were notable features of very good planning practices in RSE (Department of Education and Science, 2009). In one third of schools, Inspectors found that RSE policies had scope for development. The absence of a clear programme of content for implementation at each class level was a particular feature noted for development.

The findings reported that certain aspects of 'Taking Care of my Body' and 'Growing and Changing'; the strand units which address the sensitive areas in SPHE were not implemented at all: 'these schools were found not to teach the anatomical names of male and female body parts or how the body parts develop. Learning in the area of sexuality, birth and new life was often only partially implemented and in some schools restricted to inputs from external speakers to senior pupils (Department of Education and Science, 2009, p21)'. In terms of individual teachers planning in RSE, the report highlights that two thirds of teachers planned to a competent or very good standard in RSE, while classroom planning was found to be unsatisfactory in one third of instances. Particular factors outlined included the absence of an outline of content to be taught, and an intention to only implement the RSE programme partially, with more teachers not addressing the more sensitive areas of learning at all (Department of Education and Science, 2009). In addition, 60% of Principals reported engaging external speakers to support the implementation of the SPHE curriculum. While the Gardai and local fire service featured prominently among the speakers engaged, many also reported engaging external personnel to support the implementation of the more sensitive aspects of the curriculum, particularly in the senior classes.

Since the publication of this report in 2009, Department of Education Circular 0022/2010 has been issued by the Department of Education which outlines Best Practice Guidelines for Primary Schools in relation to SPHE. The circular outlines "precise" criteria which must

pertain to inviting visitors to the classroom to supplement the SPHE curriculum, and among these are highlighted; “visitors must work under the guidance and supervision of the classroom teacher, who must remain in the classroom with the pupils at all times and retain the central role in the delivery of the subject matter in SPHE lessons...Visitors must never replace the class teacher (Department of Education and Science, 2010, p2)”. The 2009 report noted incidents where speakers were given considerable latitude in what they delivered to pupils, without a comprehensive briefing from the Principal or teacher in advance and engagement with pupils took place in the absence of the class teacher. As the findings from the report highlight; “An over-reliance on external speakers can place restrictions on the level of follow-up that can be engaged in at the individual classroom level as the lesson content is not delivered by the pupils’ teacher and the pupils themselves may have issues they wish to further discuss following the visit of the external speaker (Department of Education and Science, 2009, p50)”.

The report also identified particular issues in relation to RSE, as a result of interviews held with teachers. Teachers were asked to consider their familiarity with the RSE aspect of the SPHE Curriculum. 37% of the teachers interviewed considered themselves to be very familiar with the Programme, while 55% considered that they were “reasonably familiar” with the content and 8% admitted that they were “not familiar” with the programme at all (Department of Education and Science, 2009). Over the course of the evaluation, lessons addressing RSE specific content were observed in nearly 40% of the classrooms. Lessons were observed on a wide range of themes, including self-esteem, feelings and emotions and relationships and decision making with a few instances of lessons addressing the more sensitive areas of the RSE curriculum. In just over 10% of classrooms, the Inspectors reported there was scope for development, particularly to ensure there was a match between the content being taught and the age and ability of the pupils and also to allow for differentiation (Department of Education and Science, 2009).

The report also included the voice of parents through the administration of a questionnaire to parents of pupils in senior classes and through a selected number of focus group interviews. Over three-quarters of the parents reported that they were aware of the RSE policy in their child’s school and just 5% of parents reported dissatisfaction with the approach taken by the school in the implementation of RSE. And while parents did express the view that RSE was being implemented in the school, they went on to report that sexuality issues were not being addressed early enough or regularly enough in their child’s education. This is important when considered in light of the comments uncovered in the research by Farrelly (2014). Comments such as “such explanations are the remit of Parents/Guardians” and “children are directed to ask parents for further information on specific issues” highlights that there is a disconnect between what parents consider schools should address and what schools do address.

Questionnaires and focus group interviews were also conducted in the aforementioned DES (2009) study, with pupils in senior classes to consider the pupil voice in the findings of this report. While pupils strongly emphasised in the focus group how important it is for them to know about body changes, over 49% of pupils who completed the questionnaire admitted that they would not be comfortable asking questions about their body in school.

A number of recommendations were presented in the report, some specifically addressing RSE. In relation to planning, systematic whole school planning of SPHE that incorporates RSE is key to including quality SPHE teaching in schools. This planning should be collaborative and involve teachers, management and parents. A review of implementation of the curriculum, including RSE implementation should be conducted regularly. The professional development needs of teachers in relation to the implementation of the RSE programme should be

considered, including newly qualified teachers, and most importantly, schools should ensure that all elements of the RSE programme are implemented at all class levels.

While advocating for revision of the RSE curriculum, it is clear that challenges remain in implementing the current curriculum. In widening the scope of the RSE curriculum within the context of SPHE, to include teaching and understanding about different sexualities and family structures, this area will demand a greater knowledge, understanding and willingness on the part of teachers to engage meaningfully with all that it entails.

The Less Often Considered, but Worth Considering

Kathleen Lynch authors a chapter in John Baker's (2006) book *Equality: From Theory to Action*. She presents a framework for inequality which is worth considering when addressing issues of inequality. One of the four "pillars" of her equality framework considers "Equality of Respect and Recognition". Lynch argues that inequalities of respect and recognition in education are rooted in the "symbolic realm" and are expressed in degrees of inclusion and exclusion. One particular practice she cites as particularly important in sustaining inequality of respect and recognition is "a general silence or invisibility that is often accompanied by devaluation or condemnation (Baker, 2004, p 155)". Wallis and VanEvery (2000) acknowledge that while attention to diversity and difference is now widespread in schools, sexuality is notable for its absence. Children who come from same sex families may experience this form of non-recognition in school where their sexuality is not named or is not accepted on equal terms with heterosexuality and the silence that surrounds same cannot give a true sense of belonging to a school community. Avoidance and silencing of the topic will promote the message that we are dealing with something that is not legitimate, or not desired (Shai, 2011). Furthermore, this lack of attention to sexuality constructs a present whereby teenagers and adults have difficulty "coming out" as lesbian, gay or bisexual later in life (Wallis and VanEvery, 2000).

Not alone is there the silence that surrounds the issue, there is also consideration of the language that is associated with homosexuality and how it is used by children as a form of slugging. Hardie and Bowers (2012) consider that it is only in the last thirty years or so that the terms "gay" and "lesbian" have come to be accepted terms of reference. "Nowadays there is recognition in some circles at the use of gay as a general adjective to describe something of little value, boring or worthy of scorn (Hardie and Bowers, 2012, p61)". Research indicates that teachers are more likely to ignore homophobic comments such as "gay" if the results had racial or sexist overtones (Sears, 1992, Woods and Harbeck, 1992, in Hardie and Bowers 2012). Shai (2011) reflects on situations where no sanctions are applied upon those who use the term "faggot" or "homo" as a way to curse another and when children are not reprimanded for ridiculing a child who may not be acting in line with conventional gender-typical behaviour. DePalma and Atkinson (2010) outline that school based homophobia is an increasing concern in many national contexts. Their research highlights that very few teachers were prepared to engage in curriculum based work on issues of homophobia, including homophobic bullying. Not addressing this subject makes room, he believes for homophobia to develop. Much of the fear of undertaking this work and indeed other activities such as the use of picture books relating to same sex families, related to a fear of parent's disapproval of "promoting" homosexuality. In the Irish context, given that over 90% of all primary schools remain under the Management of the Catholic Primary Schools Management Association, teachers may well

have genuine concerns undertaking this work and the potential disapproval of some from religious grounds as undoubtedly there remains a tension between the teachings of the Catholic Church and issues relating to same sex families. However, the Education Act must guide teachers in terms of curriculum implementation, so especially in this area it is of critical importance that the curriculum is up to date about what must be taught to children. If we cannot discuss with our children issues of homophobia, it is difficult to argue that we are fully implementing the Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary schools (2013).

De Palma and Atkinson (2010) argue that the definition of sexuality is a restricting factor and prevents teachers from exploring non-heterosexuality and gender variance within educational contexts. “Sexuality...doesn’t simply involve sex but rather sexual identity, love, empathy, kinship and comfort: things we all need and search for (Watkins, 2008, p116)”. Wallis and VanEvery (2000) argue that homosexuality is assumed to be fundamentally associated with sexual activity, in a way that heterosexuality is not. Certainly, in discussing issues in relation to same sex families, this should be considered in the context of the Strand Unit “Myself and my Family” in the SPHE curriculum and not solely in the context of RSE as while it relates to RSE and teachers in the Irish context relate the topic to RSE, it belongs to the broader SPHE curriculum as a whole. “Whilst sexuality is supposedly absent in the primary-school classroom, it is also fully present both through that absence and the implicit presence of homosexuality (Allan et al, 2008, p324)”.

Reviewing RSE: Potential Directions!

Both the NCCA Curriculum Review and the Department of Education Inspectorate evaluation of RSE point to the need for support for teachers in implementing this curriculum area at all class levels. A review of guidelines and resources would progress the implementation of RSE at school level. If we want to ensure that the education we deliver to our children is current, inclusive and supportive of the Equal Status Act, now is the time for action. The RSE support materials from Infants to sixth class, along with the Stay Safe and Walk Tall materials and the three sets of resources that are endorsed by the Department of Education and Skills support the implementation of the SPHE Curriculum. Both the Stay Safe and the Walk Tall materials have been updated and will shortly be available to schools, with the former making explicit reference to homophobic bullying. Considering that the RSE manuals are more outdated than either the Walk Tall or Stay Safe resources, it is timely and necessary that these manuals be updated to include reference to teaching about different sexualities, including homosexuality. In so doing it will help reflect the “R” part of RSE, namely relationships, and allow children to understand and accept the many different forms of relationships. This more than anything else would support teachers in implementing this curriculum across all class levels.

The concept of wellbeing and in particular children’s wellbeing is receiving increased attention in education. Recently, the Inspectorate conducted a pilot project on an evaluation of wellbeing in a number of primary schools in Ireland and a report on same is expected. The Wellbeing in Primary School Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion published in 2015, consider that “Social, Personal and Health education is central to pupil development in its broadest sense and is an essential part of school curricula (Department of Education and Skills, 2015, p15)”. Consideration of children’s wellbeing must take account of all children and their families feeling a sense of welcome and belonging in their school community and furthermore children must receive an education in RSE, that is developmental in nature and which will prepare them for some of the many challenges they may face into their teenage years.

When reviewing RSE as part of a wider SPHE curriculum review, and in giving consideration to the implementation of the current RSE curriculum at all class levels, there is no doubt that since the publication of the 1996 RSE guidelines, the constitution of the family unit has evolved considerably. Most recently, the referendum on marriage equality held in Ireland on the 22nd of May 2015 has legalised same sex marriage in this country. This bill was signed into law by the President on the 29th of August 2015. If, until this significant inclusion in our constitution, schools have chosen not to include representation of same sex families in “appreciat(ing) and respect(ing) that not all families are the same (Government of Ireland, 1999)”, schools need to embrace this representation of family within school life. A number of resources have been made available to support schools in this process including the “Respect” guidelines; a collaboration between the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN) and the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO), designed to help schools both understand homophobic bullying and how to deal with it, and to teach children in an appropriate manner about different forms of sexuality.

Interestingly however, despite the fact that these guidelines were launched by the then Minister for Education, Jan O Sullivan, they do not carry the Department of Education logo, and therefore by its lack of association, its endorsement. One must reflect on the message this delivers to schools, that teaching about different sexualities is very much optional, and that schools can simply dismiss teaching about sexuality as it is not placed firmly within either the curriculum or supporting materials produced by the Department of Education and Skills (DES). This year marks the 20th anniversary of the publication of the RSE guidelines to schools. If the DES were to update and endorse RSE guidelines and support materials which made reference to different sexualities, this would give a clear message to schools and the wider community that it is both appropriate and necessary to teach children living in modern day Ireland that all forms of sexuality are equal. In doing so it would prove beyond doubt that the marriage referendum deemed to be about equality for all, is indeed a reality for all adults and children living in Ireland, and it would represent a very significant way of celebrating the anniversary of publication and further prove just how far Irish society has developed.

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