



RCNI Submission

**To the National Council for Curriculum & Assessment
Consultation on the draft report of
The Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education**

October 2019

Rape Crisis Network Ireland (RCNI)

Rape Crisis Network Ireland (RCNI) is a specialist information and resource centre on rape and all forms of sexual violence. We advocate for the rights of survivors of sexual violence and work towards prevention. The RCNI role includes the development and coordination of national projects such as national education collaborations and using our expertise to influence national policy and social change, and supporting and facilitating multi-agency partnerships. We are owned and governed by our member Rape Crisis Centres who provide free advice, counselling and other support services to survivors of sexual violence in Ireland.

1. Introduction

1.1 RCNI welcomes the active and open engagement facilitated by the NCCA to date on this review and the careful listening that has been evident throughout. The increasing ubiquity of messages about sex and sexual relationships in our cultural spaces, many of them harmful, misogynistic and violent, means that it is imperative that we devise effective tools to support and empower children with information and efficacy to safely and positively engage with their own experiences of sex and sexuality.

1.2 RCNI strongly endorse **the holistic approach** recommended by the report as outlined in the survey. However, we are querying whether there is a critical gap in the depth and breadth of the approach. While the holistic approach derives from the UNESCO definition and therefore includes 'social issues', RCNI wonder if the NCCA report is silent around some of these social issues, namely sexism and its impact on sex and sexuality. We are in agreement that the approach should focus on positive aspects of sex and sexuality, identifying good consent practice and what a good relationship is, but the reality is that the world children currently occupy is heavily gendered and violent.

We wonder at the report's absence of explicit engagement with the issue and reality of sexism, heteronormative gendered sexual expectations, stereotypes, misogyny and indeed violence against women. **An exploration of consent is both disingenuous and dangerous when addressed from an assumption of 'neutrality' or gender blindness.** It is therefore deeply concerning to us that this aspect of consent is all but unspoken throughout this report. While we might, in good faith, understand it to be implicitly understood, it would be wholly irresponsible of us not to make the case, in the strongest possible manner that this should be made explicit for the avoidance of doubt.

An approach that seeks to promote young people making healthy, safe and positive choices and decisions about sex and their sexuality that does not in parallel and explicitly explore the societal constraints and limitations placed upon them in their choice-making has the impact of giving young people responsibility over matters they do not control thus rendering 'empowerment', disempowering.

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The assertions around empowerment and individuals' development of efficacy in the absence of a critical engagement with our cultural context, may mean that any negative experiences are processed as repeated individual 'failure', inducing apathy and reinforcing a cycle of self and victim-blaming for sexual violence victims. An assumption of a level playing field when the facts attest to unfortunately highly gendered discrimination and oppression is therefore the opposite of 'neutral', it is complicit. We would strongly urge the draft report be amended to avoid inadvertently through omission, replicating conditions that are facilitative of rape-culture.

Please note that on page 74, bullet point three, 'It is inclusive across the domains of sexuality, gender, culture, ethnicity, dis/abilities, faiths and beliefs.' The category of 'sex' has been omitted and needs to be included.

1.3 RCNI strongly endorse the development of a **single integrated curriculum**. Again we would reiterate that the aspects to be addressed must include gendered sexual expectations and discrimination, these are currently not listed on page 75.

1.4 RCNI very much welcome the recommendations to professionalise **SPHE specialisation** and would very much welcome collaborative engagement on supporting resource development, training and CPD should capacity allow.

1.5 Parents and guardians are partners in a child's education, including in RSE. We would endorse the principle that the development of parallel resources for parents about the SPHE programme, is seen as an integral to curriculum development in this area.

1.6 RCNI appreciates the distinction being made by the NCCA report between the cause and symptoms of the challenges faced by SPHE.

1.7 **Short and intermediate term**. We endorse the steps recommended by the report and reiterate that the topics and themes are critically incomplete. In the NCCA development of guidance to support teaching RCNI would recommend a comprehensive consultation process which ensures the voices of specialists on sexual and domestic violence are heard in so far as it practicable and notwithstanding the sector's capacity challenges.

1.8 We welcome the commitment to engage with the sector on the development of resources and interagency collaboration. A consideration on how that is to be achieved needs to be the funding and capacity crisis in the DSVV sector, evident in the relatively low specialist input into the NCCA consultation process to date.

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1.9 We welcome the long term goal towards sustainability of specialisation and accreditation.

RCNI knowledge base and background to this Submission

2.1 RCNI has been engaging with the question of education and prevention since our inception. Some key highlights:

- Developed the national standard on awareness raising to move sexual violence prevention education from a victim focus approach to a prevention and bystander focus, it was adopted as national policy, guiding all government spending on awareness raising in this area.
- Worked with USI in 2013 to incorporate consent into their sexual health 3rd level education and awareness initiatives.
- Developed a partnership with Foróige nationally to integrate sexual violence prevention into their youth development training Real U Programme which has been rolling out for the past 5 years with the support of Crisis Pregnancy in the HSE.
- Worked with the HSE, Crisis Pregnancy Programme within Healthy Ireland to develop modules for inclusion in the B4Udecide RSE programme for 12 – 15 year olds in a review stage. These modules centre on personal self-awareness, empathy, communications and consent.
- Developed a Transition Year programme alongside the rest of the RCC sector and were the principal beneficiary partner in a successful European Union bid to draw down the funds to equip the roll out of this programme from four rape crisis centres across the country.
- Commissioned 3rd level based research to understand sexual consent behaviour out of which emerged a body of further research and activity including the development of the Smart Consent programmes and further research in this area. In the initial research young people in 3rd level themselves identified how unprepared they felt for the complexity of negotiating sexual activity and they strongly recommended consent workshops be delivered.
- Development of RCC bystander programme which has been rolled out in some 3rd level institutions.
- A member of the RESPECT network which is an interagency 3rd level coalition to look at how 3rd level institutions respond to and prevent sexual violence.
- Our Executive Director, Dr Clóna Saidléar was a Ministerial appointed expert on the Consent Framework for HEIs group.

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