

Exploring the Inclusion of LGBTQI+ Information in Relationships and Sexuality Education in Irish Primary Schools

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Laura Curtis is a final year student of the Bachelor of Education programme in Marino Institute of Education. Her interest in RSE stems from her experience on school placement as well as her passion for inclusion and acceptance in Irish primary schools.

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INTRODUCTION

This article aims to investigate the relationship between the inclusion of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning and Intersexual (LGBTQI+) information in the Irish Relationships and Sexuality Education programme (RSE) for primary schools using documentary analysis. The purpose of the article, and the broader dissertation is to identify the impact the representation of LGBTQI+ information can have on children's perception of sexuality; to analyse the RSE programme in Irish primary schools, focusing on the inclusion of LGBTQI+ information; and to investigate the impact a school's ethos has on the inclusion of LGBTQI+ information. It was hoped that an analysis of the Irish RSE programme in conjunction with an investigation of its influence on children's awareness and perception of sexualities will identify whether there is a link between the national RSE programme and children's perception of sexuality.

The motivation for choosing this topic for research was because, even though I was lucky to have experienced an education where information regarding my gender and heterosexual inclination were frequently represented and accepted, it is becoming increasingly evident that

this is not the experience of all children in Irish primary schools. My excitement to become a qualified primary teacher is contrasted with the realisation that I will soon have a considerable impact on the way students perceive the world around them. As a teacher, it is my responsibility to educate myself on how to include all children in my class equally. The creation of a new RSE programme for Irish primary schools highlights the need for teachers to educate themselves on the reasons for this development. It is hoped that the research presented in this article will support student teachers and others to learn more about how to support the inclusion of all children in the classroom.

CONTEXT

It is well reported that due to the historic influence of Catholicism in Ireland, 89% of Irish primary schools are under the patronage of the Catholic Church (Coolahan & Hussey, 2012). Schools under Catholic patronage are expected to integrate their religious beliefs and values into the education of their students (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2016). This is outlined in the Rules and Regulations for National Schools which state that “a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school” (Government of Ireland, 1946, p.38). Considering that historically the Catholic Church openly promoted their view on homosexuality as sinful (Ratzinger, 1986; Kelly, 1987; Wallis & VanEvery, 2000), it is understandable that heterosexuality would be presented as the norm.

In Irish society at large, the inclusion of the LGBTQI+ community has significantly improved. Beginning in 1993 with the decriminalisation of male homosexuality and more recently with the passing of the Gender Recognition Act (2015). According to the Gay and Lesbian Education Network (2016), approximately 11% of Irish primary and post primary children identify as part of the LGBTQI+ community. This study emphasised the need to investigate whether Irish primary schools are providing children with an education environment that encourages them to accept and appreciate the diverse sexualities that exist in the 21st Century. The RSE programme has remained unchanged since its implementation, despite the significant developments regarding sexuality in Ireland, represented in Figure 1 (Government of Ireland, 2000). This has resulted in the proposed development of a new RSE programme (House of Oireachtas, 2018).

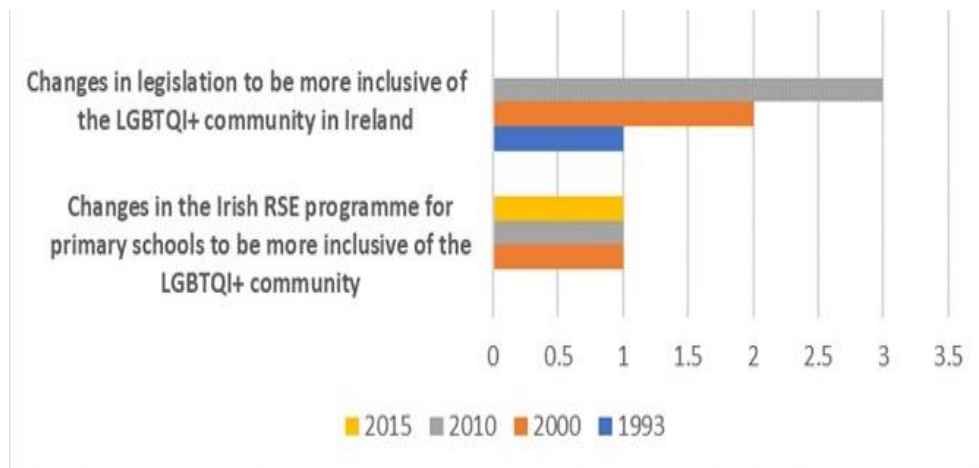


Figure 1. A Comparison of Changes Made to National Legislation and Changes Made to the Irish RSE programme for Primary Schools to be more inclusive of the LGBTQI+ Community (Graph compiled by the author for the purpose of the research)

Although the implementation of RSE is mandatory in Irish primary schools, current legislation allows each school to implement their own RSE policy designed around based on “the core values and ethos of the school” (Government of Ireland, 1995, 2.2(iii)). The governance manual for primary schools published by the DES in 2015, repeats this phrase despite developments in society over the course of twenty years. As a result, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has said that by prioritising the rights of the patron body, The Education Act (1998) has limited what can be achieved through the national curriculum (cited in Mayock, Kitching & Morgan, 2007).

A proposal for a new RSE programme was published online by the NCCA in 2019. The programme was faced with opposition and an apparent lack of awareness surrounding the current programme taught in primary schools. One group of parents created an online petition called “Hands off our kids” which aimed to prevent what they regard as inappropriate information being included in the programme (2019). The group suggested that exposure to the RSE programme would also cause unnecessary gender and sexuality confusion amongst children. An absence of research regarding the impact of primary schools on children’s perception of sexuality contributes to this confusion. LGBT Ireland conducted a study of the LGBTQI+ community, based on over 1,250 students under the age of 20 (Higgins, Barker & Begley, 2016). They identified that levels of anxiety and depression were higher amongst Irish youths identifying as part of the LGBTQI+ community, than amongst their heterosexual peers. These mental health issues were significantly attributed to the lack of acceptance and

understanding surrounding alternative sexualities, emphasising the critical need for more research to be carried out in this field of education.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative documentary analysis was used to conduct the research for this article. Secondary sources including curricula, literature, policy and reports were used to address the research question (Fitzgerald, 2007). This research methodology is most suitable to answer the research question as it is imperative to examine the current RSE programme in Irish primary schools. An investigation of secondary literature regarding children's perception of sexuality and the impact of representation has been used to achieve the aims and objectives.

It is acknowledged that there are limitations to this dissertation. Documentary analysis focuses on secondary sources in isolation (Bohnsack, 2014)], meaning children's perception of sexuality could not be explored. It is challenging to accurately identify children's perceptions of sexuality due to the continued stigma surrounding the discussion of sexuality in Ireland (Kelly, 1997). Often studies are conducted using people that are willing to discuss this controversial topic, resulting in a prevalence of biased information. The researcher acknowledges that the studies included in this dissertation have been conducted by groups supporting the LGBTQI+ community, resulting in potentially biased information.

This is an area which as seen rapid change with limited research studies on sexuality or RSE carried out in Irish primary schools. Therefore, many secondary sources are considered outdated in this frequently changing field of research. This can impact the accuracy and relevance of the information included in this dissertation. Furthermore, as this dissertation is based on both personal and professional motivations, initial researcher bias is inevitable (Chenail, 2011). The researcher aims to identify and challenge these personal biases in order to objectively investigate the relationship between the inclusion of LGBTQI+ information in Irish primary schools and children's perception of sexuality.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The current RSE programme implemented in Irish primary schools was created in 2000, due to the stigmatisation surrounding pregnancy outside of wedlock (Kelly, 1997). This stigma was emphasised after the death of Ann Lovett in 1984. The programme focused on sex as an act between a man and women in a committed relationship, for the sole purpose of conception

(GOI, 2000). When the RSE programme was developed, it was illegal for same-sex couples to be married in Ireland (Halpin, 2019). Considering the Catholicism Church’s pivotal role in curricular formation (Coolahan & Hussey, 2012), it is unsurprising that the curriculum presented sexual intercourse as something done in a committed relationship, such as marriage. Limited information was included regarding puberty and gender and sexuality are categorised as only male or female, and a one- dimensional description of sex is provided. The content included in the 2000 RSE programme is outlined in Table 1.

Information included in the programme	Noteworthy absences
Physical changes males and females experience during puberty in relation to sexual intercourse	References to body parts that are not a necessary part of copulation but may still be involved in intercourse, such as the anus
Information regarding heterosexual intercourse for the purpose of creating new life	References to sexual intercourse for pleasure and homosexual intercourse

Table 1 Information on physical changes included and absent from the Irish RSE programme for primary schools (adapted from the RSE curriculum, 2000)

According to the resource materials for RSE, the programme enables children to “develop the knowledge, attitudes, values, beliefs and practical skills necessary to establish and sustain healthy personal relationships” (Government of Ireland, 2000, p. 7). As these values and beliefs are not explicitly stated, children’s sexuality development is dependent on the implicit curriculum outlined by each individual school. In Ireland, 89% of primary schools follow a Catholic ethos (DES, 2016). The implicit curriculum in these primary schools must promote the beliefs and values of their patron. This is highlighted by Bourdieu who states that social virtues taught in a school, based on the values and traits that a school promotes (1979). It is clearly stated that the implementation of RSE must follow “the core values and ethos of the school” (GOI, 1995,2.2(iii)). While this does not mean that schools can actively promote anti-LGBTQI+ views, their ethos does enable the omission of any reference to the LGBTQI+ community. Children’s perception of how to behave is therefore based on the validation and acceptance of these specific values and traits. The information included in the programme regarding social development is outlined in Table 2.

Information included in the programme	Noteworthy absences
Friends vs Acquaintances where gender is specified	The psychological aspect of sexuality development
Traits that are important in a friend	Different family structures
Love in terms of parental and heterosexual relationships	Love in terms of homosexual relationships

Table 2 Information on social and physical changes included and absent from the Irish RSE programme for primary schools (adapted from the RSE curriculum, 2000)

While Table 1 and 2 demonstrate a strong heterosexual slant to the current RSE programme, it would be inaccurate to say that a school's ethos prevents homosexuality being included in RSE. However, the current system prevents teachers from answering questions not included in the national programme, thus preventing individual schools from adapting to the needs of their diverse school community (GOI, 1997).

The invisibility of homosexuality in the Irish RSE programme disregards children who do not identify as heterosexual or are questioning their sexuality. Furthermore, the absence of any reference to the LGBTQI+ community in the RSE programme provides children with an inaccurate and biased view of sexuality, inhibiting their personal development. This absence of information is captured by Atkinson's statement; "we do teach about homosexuality from children's earliest days in school through the absence of its representation" (2002, p. 125).

Supplementary Irish programmes containing LGBTQI+ related information have been developed to support teachers to ensure that the programme is suitable for their educational context such as the *We All Belong* programme (Knox & Gavigan, 2016) and *Different Families, Same Love* (2013). The national RSE programme is due to be amended in order include more diverse information, however, the Rules and Regulations for National Schools (Government of Ireland, 1946) will remain unchanged. Therefore, the increase of LGBTQI+ information in the RSE programme may not be reflected in the programme presented in schools under Catholic patronage.

CONCLUSION

Recent public campaigns and legislative changes have highlighted increasing acceptance and representation of sexuality in Ireland. Within primary schools, it is important that children are provided with information regarding sexuality. Due to the Rules and Regulations for National Schools (Government of Ireland, 1946) and the Education Act (1998), the ethos of a school can influence the inclusion of LGBTQI+ information. Schools are entitled to promote their values and beliefs, but children's perception of sexuality must also be considered. A balance must be found between respecting the religious beliefs a school promotes, while providing children with equal opportunity to understand and explore both heterosexuality and homosexuality.

- Teachers could follow a specific policy when dealing with homophobic and transphobic incidents. It is important for children to accept themselves and each other regardless of their gender or sexual orientation. A consistent approach to these incidents is therefore essential to children's perception of sexuality.
- It would be beneficial for schools to provide students with specialised support, as part of the school's broader counselling and well-being service, where they can discuss any questions or challenges, they are facing regarding sexuality.
- Teachers must be provided with appropriate training on the implementation of the new RSE programme. LGBTQI+ focused workshops should also be implemented for existing teachers and principals in order to support staff who are fearful of parental and societal reactions to the new RSE programme.
- By consulting with representatives from the Catholic Church, the Department of Education should develop guidelines for the inclusion of LGBTQI+ information which respects the Catholic ethos by consulting with representatives from the Catholic Church.

The inclusion of LGBTQI+ information in primary schools is a national challenge, significantly influenced by the Department of Education in conjunction with patron bodies and school communities. While the information included in the new RSE programme is out of the control of primary schools and educators, an acceptance of all sexualities can be fostered in many ways. According to Larrabee and Morehead (2010) "Teachers are leaders who influence the children of the world. If we want a society that is acceptable and free, it starts in the classroom" (p. 39). It is important that teachers are aware of what they can do to provide their students with a safe environment to authentically understand sexuality. It will be a gradual and slow process but there is no doubt that it is an important one.

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