**The Elements of a good RSE Course**

It is worth noting from the outset that no-one can define the content of a good Relationships and Sexuality Education course - at least not one that is to be taught in a public school - without first making moral judgements on what will benefit the young person and what will ultimately contribute to the public good.

In a push towards more secular Western States, governments are increasingly encouraged to be neutral on moral and religious questions so that individuals can be free to choose his or her own conception of the good life.

The American political philosopher, Michael Sandel, in his book *Justice: What’s the Right thing do?* reminds us however that the ‘aspiration to neutrality’ in political decision-making is a false narrative.

The reality is that moral judgments are unavoidable in political discussion and debate. Sandel illustrates this point by looking at the abortion debate. The ‘pro-choice’ position, he notes, is perceived to be a neutral one in that it seemingly does not impose a moral or religious viewpoint. It argues instead for women to have the freedom to choose their own course of action. However, the ‘pro-choice’ position rests on the moral judgment that the fetus is not a person from the moment of conception and therefore does not deserve protection. This is clearly a moral viewpoint informed by a ‘faith’ position. As Sandel points out, ‘the case for permitting abortion is not more neutral than the case for banning it’.

So as we come to think about RSE it is always important to start from the premise that nobody comes to formulate an RSE course without first making moral judgements on the ‘good’ of the subject. This will include questions around how I understand the identity of the child or young person, how do I view them within their relational networks and wider community, how do I perceive of them as moral decision-makers; importantly, how do I understand the young person and their developing sexuality.

Ultimately, in formulating a good RSE course I will be making judgements on what my understanding is of the meaning and purpose of human relationships and human sexuality - this will shape the ‘truth’ that I tell a young people about their sexuality and their sexual choices.

To illustrate, we can look at the moral judgments made in a recent report discussing the implementation and extension of consent workshops at third level institutions in Ireland. Consent has become the moral touchstone in our public discourse around acceptable sexual behaviour, and therefore there is an increasing push to teach sexual consent to young people.

The research adopts an approach to sexual consent that is based on principles of positive sexual health promotion, which states that ‘sexuality is integral to personal identity, is a normal part of the development progression and transition in young adulthood, which seeks expression within respectful, consensual relationships.’ Within this statement there are both belief statements about sexuality and moral judgments on appropriate sexual behaviour.

Yet, while the concept of sexuality is increasingly hard for the secular state to define, education is increasingly seen as a major tool within society for promoting sexual well-being and preparing children and young people for healthy and responsible relationships. This, of course, must always be balanced with the rights and responsibilities of parents as primary educators. Also, any RSE course delivered in school should be able to make explicit connections with the aims, values, ethos, moral and ethical framework of the school.

So as we think about our engagement in RSE as Christian educators I would suggest that we need to be able to articulate our own moral positions. We also need to be able present these within public discourse in a spirit of moral engagement and co-operation.

In doing this, I want to share a number of foundational principles and beliefs that I suggest will begin to shape an approach to good RSE from a Christian perspective in a public school setting, and suggest a couple of ways that these impact programme content and development:

* The Identity of the Learner

In light of the doctrine of creation there are a number of characteristics that shape our understanding of human identity. As well as each person being unique, we also affirm that they were created social, sexual, moral and spiritual. Therefore, a Christian approach to RSE will bring with it a unique understanding of the human learner, and within a vision of human flourishing, will engage with different characteristics of what is to be human.

Let’s take a moment to look at the young person as moral decision-maker:

At a policy level, a rights-based approach to RSE is increasingly advocated, where it is argued that children and young people - at an age-appropriate time - have the right to health, education and information. It is even argued that they have a right to determine what this information should be. Such an approach is seen to adopt a position of entitlement and is perceived to avoid presenting young people with a prescriptive morality – except of course the prescription that their sexual choices should safe, responsible and respectful.

In contrast, a Christian understanding of the human learner recognises and respects their created capacity for moral decision-making. But it understands that this never happens in a moral vacuum. You cannot encourage young people to reason about the ‘good’ of relationships and sexual behaviour without first providing them with moral resources and starting points from which to do so. As ethicist, Stanley Hauerwas states: ‘we do not create moral values, principles, virtues; rather they constitute a life for us to appropriate. The very idea that we choose what is valuable undermines our confidence in its worth’.

Therefore, we must challenge an ‘aspiration for neutrality’ in RSE policy and programmes and present children and young people with a vision for their relational and sexual lives in line with our understanding of what is it to be human. We should also therefore challenge those messages that we believe diminish the importance and value of the individual, relationships and sex, including over-sexualised cultural norms. Often these messages will be communicated through media channels, including television, magazines and increasingly the internet, and it is important that young people are given opportunity to critically reflect on the messages that they are receiving. Young people need an understanding of the good of sexual behaviour in order to exercise their moral agency within a coherent narrative of identity.

* Centred on Personal and Relational Development

A good Relationships and Sexuality Education programme will be centred on personal and relational development in line with a vision of what is to live a flourishing life.

Relationships and Sexuality Education is a statutory component within Personal Development in the Northern Ireland Curriculum for Key Stage 3 (11-14 yr olds) and 4 (14-16yr olds). And guidance for schools has defined RSE as follows:

‘Relationships and Sexuality Education is about more than simply educating young people about biological sexual reproduction. Although it is often referred to as ‘sex education’, this terminology is misleading. Relationships and Sexuality Education is a lifelong process encompassing:

• the acquisition of knowledge, understanding and skills; and

• the development of attitudes, beliefs and values about sexual identity, relationships and intimacy.’

Therefore, in our understanding of young people as moral decision-makers, we believe that young people not only need knowledge to inform choices, but skills to enact them, and values that give them meaning.

If we are looking, for example, at the pressures that young people can face to take part in risk taking behaviours such as underage drinking or sex, they don’t just need information on the dangers of drinking or being sexually active at a young age, they need the skills to be able to respond to pressures and learn how to say ‘no’ clearly, decisively and respectfully. This requires them to learn how to manage their emotions and behaviours in a range of settings. But they also need to understand *why* they should say ‘no’ – that there is a better choice to make and better way to live.

In addition to the knowledge, skills and values, we need to have a vision of the *kind* of person we want to emerge from any RSE course, not just the informationthat we want them to know or what we want them to do. But who de we want them to be? What attitudes and dispositions to we want young people to develop? As Christian educators, we therefore need to nurture the cultivation of moral character that corresponds with a Christian view of personhood. For example, a biblical vision of justice focuses our attention on a concern for others and the pursuit of right relationship rather than merely self-interest, and a vision of faithfulness challenges a cultural narrative which is often reduced to promoting freedom and individual autonomy.

* Concern for Holistic Welfare

Any RSE programme that is centred on personal and relational development should demonstrate concern for the holistic welfare of young people. This is informed by our understanding of human identity as well as a concern for the good of all young people. This concern for holistic welfare includes a concern for their sexual health as well as their spiritual health.

Within guidance in Northern Ireland, Personal Development is defined as follows:

‘Encouraging each child to become personally, emotionally, socially and physically effective to lead healthy, safe and fulfilled lives and to become confident, independent and responsible citizens, making informed and responsible choices and decisions throughout their lives.’

Key elements of Personal Development include Personal Understanding, Mutual Understanding, Personal Health, Moral Character and Spiritual Awareness.

A holistic concern for young people will not just focus on the unwanted outcomes of teenage sex like teenage pregnancy. If it did then we should be very pleased with recent findings. 2017 saw the number of births to teenage mothers in NI decrease to the lowest on record.[[1]](#footnote-1) This figure was less than half the number recorded a decade ago. There has also been a decline in the proportion of young people (11-16 yrs olds) reporting having had sexual intercourse, from 12% in 2000 to 4% in 2016. Yet at the same time other findings indicate that 44% of young people in N. Ireland say they have experienced a mental health problem; 68% revealed they always or often feel stressed; 60% said they always or often feel anxious; 33% reported they always or often feel hopeless.

A holistic concern for young people in an RSE course will not just focus on achieving good sexual health outcomes, however these are defined, but will be concerned with a young person’s overall health and wellbeing – the health of the whole person, including their physical, mental, emotional and relational health. A good RSE programme will not just transmit sexual health information at an age-appropriate time, but will teach young people social skills on how to build and maintain healthy and worthwhile relationships, including relationship skills that centre around commitment, communication and conflict resolution.

It will also inform young people of the dangers of the on-line world, including child sexual exploitation and the damaging impact of pornography. As technology advances young people will increasingly need skills and wisdom to navigate how they use it appropriately, including a realisation of the long-term impact that decisions made today can have on their futures, for example, addressing the rise in behaviours like sexting.

Also, a concern for the holistic welfare of children and young people – as a personal development approach indicates - will allow opportunity to nurture the moral and spiritual agency of the young person by encouraging reflection on questions of meaning such as ‘Who am I?’, ‘What do I desire?’ and ‘How then shall I live?’ Answering these questions is central to developing a strong moral self-awareness and contributes to the exploration of moral character.

* Delaying-Sex Centred

A good RSE programme will be delaying sex-centred. Christian approaches to RSE are often criticised because they teach abstinence and seemingly shame young people into not having sex. But a delaying-sex centred approach to RSE is not telling young people to say ‘no’ to sex, but encouraging young people to say ‘no’ to sex for the right reasons. Let’s explore this for a moment.

The December 2018 edition of *The Atlantic* publication in the US will feature an article entitled: ‘Why are young people having so little sex?’ The article opens by suggesting that ‘This should be a boom time for sex’, noting that ‘With the exception of perhaps incest and bestiality—and of course nonconsensual sex more generally—our culture has never been more tolerant of sex in just about every permutation.’

Yet in an age of unprecedented sexual freedom, it appears that this generation is having a lot less sex than the generation before. The age of first sex has increased, and the pregnancy rate among teenagers has dropped significantly. Sounds like good news, perhaps. But what is important to take note of is the conclusions of the journalist, who suggests that these are indicators of a broader withdrawal from physical intimacy by young people – a withdrawal that is extending well into adulthood.

Reasons for this could include the increased use of pornography, as well as the time consumed in technology and other activities. She also points to a decline in meaningful social interactions and the inability of young adults to relate to one another. This is evidenced in the growth of the ‘hook up’, casual sex culture as well as the shift in dating to the online world. As one student commented: ‘We hook up because we have no social skills. We have no social skills because we hook up’.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In light of this, it does seem that this generation is saying ‘no’ to sex. Indeed, it could be used as evidence that an ‘abstinence’ approach to RSE is in fact working. But sadly it shows that a rejection of relational sex is in fact a rejection of meaningful relationships and an ability to relate. This is a concerning observation in a culture that is increasingly marred by loneliness. It is also an indication of a cultural narrative that has lost an understanding of sexual intimacy. This cannot be rediscovered if we reduce our sexual ethic to consent in any context.

As sociologist, Christian Smith, in his large-scale study among emerging adults in the United States notes: ‘Emerging adults can jump into intimate relationships, assuming that sex is just another consumer item, recreational thrill, or lifestyle commodity. But many of them soon discover the hard way that sex is much more profound and precious than that.’

So what is the place for abstinence in a good RSE programme? A good RSE programme will continue to be delaying sex-centred. From all accounts, this is a healthy choice. But young people also need time to develop as a whole person and to reach maturity without the expectation to act on sexual impulse or respond to cultural pressure. This includes needing time to develop a framework of beliefs and values which will enable them to make wise and informed choices in the future around relationships and sex. Young people need a reason to say ‘no’ to sex, as well an understanding of the ideal context in which to say ‘yes’. As indicated earlier, this moral decision-making does not and cannot happen in a moral vacuum. We need a vision of the good that will influence attitudes and behaviours.

Therefore, a good RSE programme will also be ‘sex positive’ in that it gives meaning, worth and dignity to sexual intimacy in relationship. Simply pointing young people towards pleasurable sexual experiences within any consensual context diminishes the importance of relational intimacy for human flourishing. Our vision for young people is not just that they will emerge unharmed from any sexual encounter but that they will give serious consideration to the context, and type of relationship, that will give meaning and purpose to their sexual choices. Indeed, many young people simply need reassurance that saying is ‘no’ is still a valid choice, even if they have already made the choice to be sexually active.

And this leads me to a final principle:

A good RSE programme

* Promotes permanent and exclusive relationships, like marriage.

A good RSE programme should encourage young people to examine the benefits of permanent and exclusive relationships as a context for sex. A Christian understanding of sex signifies an exclusive and permanent type of relationship as exemplified in marriage. Evidence points to the fact that young people still aspire to marriage, yet couples are much more likely today to cohabit which leads to higher levels of relational instability and family breakdown.

Evidence for the good of marriage is clear – for the wellbeing of the couple, the family unit and society – as exemplified in the research of the Marriage Foundation. We need to help young people to understand that the choices they make today around relationships and sex will impact their future relationships – not least by shaping the person that they are becoming.

In an over-sexualised culture, a good RSE programme should also help young people to appreciate the intimacy of non-sexual, enduring and faithful relationships like friendship and familial love. We can all live without sex, but our lives are dangerously diminished without companionship and friendship.

1. NISRA (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA.) The report reveals that just 692 of the 23,075 births in Northern Ireland in 2017 were to mothers under the age of 20.  This is less than half the number that was recorded a decade previously (1,405) and 65 per cent fewer than three decades ago (2,008). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/12/the-sex-recession/573949/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)